The Relationship between Competence-based and Reflective Learning Approaches to Education within the Diploma in Social Work

By

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Abstract

The relationship between competence-based and reflective learning approaches within UK qualifying social work education and training has long been a source of concern. Unease has been expressed that a competence-based model of teaching, learning and assessment that is grounded in a technical rational conceptualisation of social work has gained pre-eminence and has marginalised a more thoughtful, critical and creative reflective learning approach. At the very least, the two approaches have been discussed in terms of tension if not outright incompatibility. Using a multiple case study research design, this thesis explores the relationship between the two approaches as perceived by students, practice assessors and programme personnel (tutors and partner agency representatives) from three separate DipSW programmes in England and Wales. The research explores the understandings by educators and students of each approach: whether the approaches were seen as contradictory or as complementary and where and how each approach – or combined use of the two – was recognised as informing each of the social work programmes considered. A further line of enquiry relates to whether the two approaches were seen as promoting different forms of professional identity in qualifying social work practitioners. The research findings suggest that the nature of the relationship between the two approaches lies within, and is contextualised by, a series of other relationships which influence and inform each programme. The relationships between teaching, learning and assessment, between education and training, between the university and the agency bases, between critical and functional forms of reflection and between the respective approaches and different forms of post-qualifying professional identity emerge as significant, as does the relationship between what is espoused by educators and what is practised.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introducing the research focus:

> "Thank you, it's been great ... thanks ... this course has prepared me really well to work in a social services office."

These were the farewell words of a departing student, who had newly attained the qualification of the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) and in many ways they represent the genesis of and rationale for this research study. My response at the time, as a DipSW tutor, was automatic: good wishes for her career, encouragement to maintain contact with the programme and the university and so on. But her comment sparked an unease that stayed with me. She had indicated that her experience of the DipSW had prepared her effectively for a certain style of social work carried out within a particular setting but, by implication, the learning and development to which she had been exposed had failed to prepare her beyond this. Further, the apparent suggestion was that this student felt equipped by her DipSW studies to practice in accordance with the proceduralism that characterises contemporary statutory social work (Horner 2006), but perhaps less equipped for other forms of social work practice. It seemed to me that this student's final observation had captured, and could be understood in terms of, the concern within contemporary UK social work qualifying education and training to simultaneously enable social work students to develop and demonstrate both immediate technical competence and, beyond this, a wider capacity for and capability in relation to reflective thought.

The standards for the DipSW were laid down at its inception in 1989 by the then awarding body, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW). These standards have continued to be upheld by CCETSW's replacement body, the General Social Care Council (GSCC)[1]. CCETSW maintained that social work

[1] Since 2001, CCETSW has been replaced by its successor the General Social Care Council (GCSS) in England and its partner organisations in Scotland (SSCC), Northern Ireland NISCC) and in Wales (the Care Council for Wales – CCW).

students need to engage with education and training that will enable each student to emerge as both a competent and a reflective practitioner. Although reflective practice and reflective learning are not necessarily one and the same, there are sufficient parallels to make it difficult to see how reflective practice can be effectively taught and learned without recourse to models of reflective learning. CCETSW's stance then essentially required DipSW programmes to draw upon both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches.

However, throughout the 1990's, a range of literature emerged that criticised the use of a competence-based approach within social work education as giving rise to an overly narrow, mechanistic and fragmented experience for students (Collins 1991, Hyland 1995, Knight and Worsley 1998). These criticisms were coupled within the literature with a concern that, notwithstanding its limitations, a competence-based approach had gained ascendancy within the discourse of social work education to the extent that it had overshadowed – and even eclipsed – the use of a reflective learning approach (Kelly and Horder 2001). It was further suggested that this perceived marginalisation of reflective learning had been in part caused, and certainly compounded, by a lack of clarity and understanding as to what reflective learning comprises (Ixer 1999). This point exemplifies the tendency within the existing literature to explicate either of the approaches on the basis of comparison with the other and thus to emphasise a sense of difference and of competing tensions between the two. The picture presented by social work education commentators then becomes one of competence-based learning as a dominant, albeit possibly flawed, educational approach that, in many respects, is oppositional in nature to the lesser used model of reflective learning.

This study sets out to investigate this portrayal and situation. Proponents of either and both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches have made their respective cases within the literature extensively. What seems to have been explored far less is, regardless of the benefits and limitations of each approach, the actual experience of the social work learner and educator (university and agency-based) in terms of the use of

each of the approaches and, crucially, whether this indicates any actual or potential synthesis of the two.

A further debate that can be identified within existing literature relates to the question of whether social work can and should be viewed as a profession. Those seeking to theorise professionalism have identified certain specific characteristics or traits of professional activity by which it may be distinguished from occupational activity (Rothman 1998). Of immediate relevance to this study is the way in which some lines of argument about the professional status of social work - and other areas of welfare practice - have moved away from claims and counter claims as to the legitimacy of social work asserting itself as a profession and have considered instead the nature of the professional identity that is seen as desirable for social work (Davies 2000, Fish and Coles 2000). Within this thesis, these ideas are seen to lead directly back to the nature of the education and training through which social workers are prepared for practice, not only because of the significance of this for the ongoing development of the practitioner generally, but also because clear parallels are proposed between different types of professional identity and the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

The research is not primarily concerned with the perceived merits and/or deficits of competence-based versus reflective learning educational approaches. Rather, it seeks to explore the relationship between the two initially posited by CCETSW as underpinning qualifying social work education and training but subsequently questioned by commentators who have argued the supremacy a of competence-based approach and the more limited use of reflective learning. Similarly, the study is not immediately concerned to identify a preferred model of professional identity for social work but, rather, aims to explore the links between the different models and the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Thus the central research focus emerges as upon the relationship between the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches that exists within the DipSW.

Immediately, this central research question can be seen as enquiring into a number of areas. Firstly, whether each of these approaches is to be found within DipSW programmes and if any sense of relationship between them does indeed exist in terms of duality of use. Further, however, the research question implies, by the very fact that it is seen as worthy of exploration, that such a relationship may not be entirely unproblematic. In addressing this central research question, certain other related lines of enquiry are pursued. These include how both social work educators and students understand the competence-based and reflective learning approaches and how they illustrate the use of either or both of the approaches within DipSW programmes. Flowing from this is the question of balance: are the two approaches drawn upon equally or is there dominance by one or the other and why might this be? Another area of interest within the research investigation is to do with the extent to which the presence - or indeed the absence - of evidence of the synthesised use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within DipSW programmes is a conscious or an explicit aspect of programme planning and delivery. Or, if such convergence is evident, it has happened by accident rather than design. The question of programme outcomes in terms of the kind of professional identity social work programmes are seeking to promote is an additional issue of relevance and interest.

This study is concerned with both the university-based tuition and the field or agency-based practice learning aspects of DipSW programmes in England and Wales and thus is interested in the perceptions not only of students and university tutors but also of practice teachers in relation to each of the above lines of enquiry. It is acknowledged that this can represent a partial picture of UK social work education only since DipSW programmes in Scotland and Northern Ireland have not formed part of the study. Nevertheless, the 'sub-questions' identified above provide a vehicle for investigating different aspects of the main research question and, collectively, they provide a means of framing an overall response that may be generalisable across the four UK countries. It should also be noted that, although this research has explored a former, rather than current, form of preparation for qualified social work[2], the implications of the findings for its successor will be of

[2] Since 2002 a social work degree has been introduced throughout the UK and this has replaced the DipSW.

relevance. This is because the social work degree, the most recent form of social work preparation, like the DipSW is predicated on the principles of both the competence-based approach and the development, during pre-qualifying education, of reflective capacity (Knott and Scragg 2007).

Structure of the thesis

Following on from this introductory chapter, Chapters Two and Three review relevant literature. The literature search undertaken used the bibliographical databases Social Sciences Citation Index and Resource Guide for the Social Sciences as a starting point for the identification of relevant books, journals and published research. Much of the material discussed is literature rather than empirical research and this limits the potential for a critical approach. Chapter Two explores the development of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches and the ways in which each has been defined. This chapter provides a brief overview of the historical development of UK social work education and relates this to the development and use of competence-based and reflective learning within qualifying social work preparation. Chapter Two concludes with discussion of the perceived merits and limitations of the respective approaches. Chapter Three offers further context through consideration of the development of social work as a profession, the ways in which traditional conceptualisations of professionalism have come to be questioned and the different models of professional identity that have evolved as a consequence of such challenge.

Chapter Four outlines the research design and methods that have been used within the study and discusses its theoretical framework, epistemology and multiple case study strategy. The approaches taken to data collection, sampling, access, ethical issues, the question of researcher identity and the analysis of the data are each described. Chapter Five presents the empirical findings in the form of a composite case study report that draws together and summarises three separate case study reports that are included as appendices. This approach to the presentation of findings has the merit of offering a

comprehensive account of the data. It also means that analytic consideration of the data resides separately in ensuing chapters. Coherence and ease of reference is addressed by means of regular links throughout the analysis chapters that direct the reader to the relevant section of the composite case study report.

Chapter Six considers respondent understandings of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches and respondent illustration of the ways in which they have experienced these within their respective DipSW programmes. Chapter Seven discusses the perceived nature of the relationship between the two approaches, whether this is conceptualised in terms of conflict or of compatibility and respondent views as to how harmonisation of the approaches may be enhanced.

Chapter Eight reviews the use of competence-based and reflective learning within each of the agency and university-based programme components. Also, the ways in which the DipSW programmes under study have developed their use of the approaches over time and the associations made by respondents between each of the approaches and different forms of professional social work identity.

Chapter Nine examines respondent views as to the use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the social work degree and briefly reviews the main analytic themes arising from the case studies. Consideration of the limitations and of the potential of this research study concludes this chapter and the thesis.

Chapter Two: Introducing Competence-based and Reflective Learning within Social Work

Introduction:

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concepts of the competence-based and the reflective approaches to learning respectively. This will be done through three main areas of discussion. First, the origins and attributed meanings of each approach will be explored. Second, their application within the specific context of UK social work education will be considered. Thirdly, the perceived merits and limitations of each approach, with particular reference to social work education, will be examined. In this way this chapter aims to clarify a foundational understanding of each of the approaches.

Origins and meanings of the competence-based approach:

The origins of the competence-based approach to education and training are commonly traced to the USA (O'Hagan 1996, Pierce and Weinstein 2000). The approach has a long history, associated with the growth of industrial psychology and an emphasis upon evidence of 'public' performance as opposed to 'private' thought (Kuhn 1970). Tuxworth (1989), for example, notes that ideas linking behavioural objectives with outcomes within the context of business and industry were around as early as the 1920s. More recently, work dating from the 1970s, and in particular that of McClelland (1973) and of Boyatzis (1982) has been recognised as foundational to contemporary notions of the competence-based approach (Manley and Garbett 2000).

Watson *et al* (2002:422) point out that the competence-based approach was initially developed 'as an alternative to intelligence-testing for jobs where a high level of intelligence was not deemed necessary'. Such jobs included non-professional, manual areas of work where specific occupational skills on the part of employees were

prioritised over more general intellectual capacity. Tuxworth (1989:11) however, proposes a more diverse and complex rationale for the promotion of the competence-based approach when he refers to the 'genesis' of the approach as being 'a distinct response to societal changes' and, particularly, as stemming from 'calls for greater relevance in the training of teachers and for a more visible accountability to the taxpayer'.

A further apparent anomaly or contradiction even in the development of the competence-based approach is highlighted by Eurat (1994) who suggests that the concept of competence was first promulgated by the professions as a way of justifying entry through examination leading to qualification. In other words, as a gatekeeping mechanism aimed at exclusion so as to maintain and perpetuate professional status and freedom (Rothman 1998). Conversely, however, the notion of competence has become a device deployed by government with the purpose of limiting professional autonomy and promoting accountability to the public (Eurat 1994, Hugman 1998, Murphy 1999). This variety of strands in the agenda for the development of the competence-based approach leads Eurat (1994:159) to conclude that 'The use of the word 'competence' is not value-neutral' and that 'the definition of what in practice was meant by 'competence' reflected the political purpose it was intended to serve'.

In attempting to define the competence-based approach, O'Hagan (1996:4) observes that the word 'competence derives from the Latin *'competens'* which means 'to be fit, proper or qualified'. This is perhaps a deceptively simplistic and thus misleading way of explaining the competence-based approach since particular interpretations exist about which clarity is necessary as they are at subtle yet significant variance with one another.

For McClelland (1973), and later for Boyatzis (1982), competency (with the plural competencies) was the accepted label for referring to a person's ability in terms of certain behavioural attributes - the individual qualities and characteristics that enable performance. Building upon the work of McClelland (1973), Boyatzis (1982) distinguished between 'threshold competencies' as those enabling adequate or acceptable

performance, and those indicative of superiority. In this view then, competency relates to specific behaviours that enable a particular job to be satisfactorily performed rather than to the job itself. In contrast, competence (with the plural competences) refers to the job rather than the person as the focus of concern. This is the preferred term within the UK and that which underpins much of employment training - including social work education - through the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (Wolf 1995, Mansfield and Mitchell 1996). Job-related competence is identified through a functional analysis of the roles and tasks that make up a given occupation and of performance criteria in relation to these.

These are two different interpretations. Their essential distinctiveness is succinctly summarised by Short (1984:201): 'Mastering particular *things* is not the same as possessing certain *qualities*'. Such difference becomes yet more apparent when certain of the assumptions underlying each interpretation are considered. For example, in emphasising behavioural qualities and processes, competency implies that these may be transferable across different occupational situations and even settings. Competence, however, is context specific since it relates to particular elements of a stated occupation. Also, and as noted earlier, competency seeks to identify and distinguish between different levels of ability whilst competence is centrally concerned with the attainment and demonstration of a minimum standard of work role performance (Horder 1998, Manley and Garbett 2000).

Yet a further interpretation of the competence-based approach comes from O'Hanlon and Andrews (1999) who propound an outcome-based conceptualisation of competence. In this view, competence is understood neither as ability in relation to the process by which individual behavioural attributes are deployed, nor the demonstration of ability in relation to discrete tasks or elements within a work role. Rather, O'Hanlon and Andrews (1999) maintain that competence is about the outcomes of performance and thus takes account of uncertainty and unpredictability as integral to occupational experience.

Such different and diverse ways of understanding and explaining what lies at the core of the competence-based approach endorse Watson *et al*'s (2002:422) observation that 'competence is a nebulous concept which is defined in different ways by different people'. Or, as expressed by Woodruffe (1991:47) rather more pithily: 'it could be just about anything'.

Despite this multiplicity of interpretations of what its essential meaning, the competence-based approach has, since the mid 1980s, dominated much of employment training in the UK through the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) (Wolf 1995). This organisation has produced a definition that appears to straddle and amalgamate the 'competency' and 'competence' schools as follows:

> 'Competence is a wide concept which embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within the occupational area. It encompasses the organisation and planning of work, innovation and coping with non-routine activities. It includes those qualities of personal effectiveness that are required in the workplace to deal with co-workers, managers and customers'
>
> (NCVQ 1988)

Thus individual behavioural attributes, discrete tasks or elements within an occupational role, transferability across differing work situations and the ability to respond to uncertainty all become subsumed under the general heading of competence (Illeris 2003). Writing with regard social work education specifically, Vass (1996:195) adopts a similarly compound approach:

> 'Competence is a successful amalgamation of knowledge, values and skills together with a process of understanding one's own self and what effects that process has on others as well as on the outcome(s) of supervision, intervention and interpersonal relations with colleagues, users, and other agencies'.

In this way the assumptions that underpin cognitive and humanistic models of human behaviour, together with those informing a more behavioural paradigm become merged in the same manner as the competence/competency distinction, and each are drawn upon to define competence.

The way in which the concept of competence has been operationalised by the NCVQ is outlined by Eurat (1994:118) as follows:

> 'The current system of functional analysis breaks the job down into functional units, and the units into elements, each of which has to be separately assessed to cover a range of situations according to a list of performance criteria'.

The structure of competence-based qualifications - or National Vocational Qualifications - created by the NCVQ for welfare workers has incorporated the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) (Murphy 1999), the UK social work qualification that immediately pre-dated the new framework for qualifying social work education and training that was introduced in 2002.

The advent of the competence-based approach to educational preparation for work within the UK has occurred within a political context (Eurat 1994, O'Hagan 1996, Rashid 2000). An association exists with the kinds of analyses expressed by commentators such as Hugman (1991) and Friedson (1994) that identified and challenged the way in which power may become invested in the professions generally, and those working within welfare as no exception, and the potential for professional/occupational misuse of such power to the detriment of service users. This is discussed further in the following chapter. Moreover, successive governments have purveyed an ideological perspective that has emphasised economic rationalism and accountability through performance monitoring across public services (Rashid 2000). In this view, technical proficiency is prioritised alongside - and even above - professional knowledge and transparency and visibility of work practices and behaviour, in order that these are amenable to external scrutiny, have become equated with occupational accountability. The competence-based approach with

its emphasis upon technical proficiency and its clearly delineated analysis of tasks is seen as a central means of achieving the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery sought by the state during and since the last decades of the twentieth century (O'Hagan 1996, Hugman 1998).

Origins and meanings of the reflective learning approach:

Whilst the origins of reflection as an approach to learning and development are seen by some as lying with the work of Plato (Grimmett 1988), others (Ixer 1999, Redmond 2006) refer to the more recent ideas of writers such as Dewey (1933), Habermas (1971) and Freire (1972). Essentially, each of these thinkers have emphasised the significance of inductive human reasoning for the attainment of knowledge. This view holds then that knowledge is derived from the sense that is made of phenomena as well as, or even rather than, what is derived by the senses.

As with the competence-based approach, a variety of definitions and understandings exist in relation to reflective learning. Indeed, lack of agreement as to precisely what constitutes this approach, in terms of social work education at least, is commonly acknowledged (Parsloe 2001). For example, Ixer (1999:513) comments that:

> 'Despite the enormous proliferation of literature on the nature and practice of reflection, still little is agreed about what it is, and that which is asserted is confusing and contradictory'.

For Dewey (1933:9) for instance, reflective thought consisted of 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends'. A sequential process of reflective learning was outlined by Dewey, involving first experience of some form of problem, next a readiness to accept and to operate within a state of uncertainty in relation to the problem situation, and thence a willingness to engage in ongoing exploration and enquiry in response to such uncertainty. In other words, Dewey argued for the

appropriateness of a constant condition of doubt and of enquiry rather than an acceptance of knowledge - however this has been derived - as given. Indeed, Dewey's contention was that: 'the absence of reflection reduces an activity to that of a blind or capricious impulse' (Redmond 2006:10).

Habermas (1971), whilst echoing certain of Dewey's ideas, may also be seen as having built upon these. Like Dewey, Habermas conceived of a reflective learning process involving stages. Habermas's concept of emancipatory learning, however, represents a further phase in the reflective learning process: that of the attainment of self-knowledge. Through conditions of uncertainty and enquiry, Habermas argued, freedom from the constraints imposed by the acceptance of dominant ideological thought and constructions of reality becomes possible, bringing with it not only insight and the development of critical consciousness but also the potential for enhanced self-awareness

To some extent, the ideas of Freire (1972) can be seen as inter-connected with those of Habermas (and Dewey) in that each emphasise the transformatory and emancipatory potential of reflection stemming from an embracing of uncertainty and a state of doubt. For Freire, however, the thrust of such emancipation is towards social liberation: 'reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence' (Freire 1972:81). Thus social and political, as well as individual, conscientization arises from critical reflection.

More recently, Schon (1983) has developed these ideas by suggesting that whilst some occupational areas may be effectively approached using the technical rationalism of knowledge of rules and procedures - and thus can be adequately prepared for on this basis - the complexity and unpredictability of occupations that revolve around human interaction (and particularly human welfare) mean that related procedural guidelines and, even, established theoretical explanations can be of foundational use only and must be built upon and expanded. Linked to this is the idea that holistic thinking rather than the fragmented thinking encouraged by the breaking down of work roles into discrete elements or tasks, is necessary for making sense of human situations (Howe 1998,

Lishman 2002). Reflection and experience are immediately associated by Schon, enabling continual consideration and re-consideration of experiences with a view to further thought.

Schon (1983, 1987,1992) has outlined his thinking in terms of a 'reflective practice' process. This comprises the following sequence: 'Knowing-in-Action', referring to the active use, in a given situation, of existing, often implicit, knowledge; reflection in the form of 'Knowledge-in Action' is triggered when some form of surprise (possibly a perceived error or failure) or dilemma arises following the deployment of 'Knowing-in-Action'. These phases are followed by either or both 'Reflection-on-Action' (wherein existing knowledge and understanding are subsequently revisited, reassessed and, through this, developed) and 'Reflection-in-Action' (wherein situational reframing takes place concurrent with the activity). The final phase and overall process - 'Reflective Practice'- is completed when, on the basis of the preceding stages, new understandings and actions are experimented with.

This process requires the provision of structured learning opportunities and the centrality of experience to the reflective process has led writers such as Jarvis (1987) and Jones and Joss (1995) to propose the model of experiential learning developed by Kolb (1984) as a useful vehicle for learning to practice reflectively. Like Dewey's (1933) formulation, Kolb's model involves a sequential and cyclical process of experience, review, conceptualisation and experimentation. This takes the form of a specific practice encounter, followed by holistic reflection and thence hypothesising in terms of a range of forms and sources of knowledge – and these stages then lead to active experimentation in which new and different ideas and actions are tried out. In the simplest terms, both Schon's and Kolb's models may be understood as learning by doing, thinking about what has been done, and trying again on the basis of the initial experience *and* the subsequent review and conceptualisation (reflection) of this. It would be a mistake, however, to reduce these ideas to the basis of 'trial and error' since both Schon and Kolb assert that the process requires careful thought and specific skills.

Atkins and Murphy (1995) have proposed five key skills or areas of capacity that reflective learners require. These are: self awareness (the ability to recognise and analyse thoughts and feelings in response to situations); an ability to recall and frame accurate description of what has occurred; a capacity for critical analysis in the sense of a readiness to question assumptions and consider alternative explanations; a readiness to synthesise or integrate new recognitions with pre-existing knowledge; and evaluation in terms of consideration of the ways in which new knowledge, emerging from reflection, may be of worth and use. In addition, open-mindedness and motivation are necessary on the part of the learner (Fisher and Somerton 2000).

It is perhaps not surprising, given the interplay between the notions, that reflection and reflective practice are not uncommonly viewed as interchangeable processes, with reflective learning located somewhere within. The development of the idea of reflective practice has not necessarily clarified what is understood as any or all of these processes, however. For example, Parsloe (2001:11) observes that 'We do not really know how the 'reflective practitioner' is created or exactly what happens between action and reflection'. Similarly, Ruch (2002:199) maintains:

> 'While the concept of reflective practice appears to have been broadly welcomed by educators and practitioners, what constitutes it, how it is realised and what it achieves remains problematic and contentious'.

Nevertheless, within social work education, consideration and appraisal of experience with a view to the development of knowledge in relation to this is, as demonstrated, a key element of a reflective approach (Gould and Taylor 1996). In addition, emphases upon the person (Ruch 2002) and upon a model of integrating theory and practice wherein theoretical ideas are induced or inferred from situations as well as or instead of deductive application (Thompson 2000, Parker 2004), are generally agreed.

In terms of emphasis upon the person i.e. the learner/worker, a resonance with the qualities of 'personal effectiveness' cited as necessary by the competence-based approach is discernible. In relation to this, Papell (1996:19) outlines as follows:

> 'Social work learners must perceive the human situation which they confront in their practice and recognise that their perceptions are filtered through their own thinking and knowing processes, through their emotions and feeling processes and through the way they themselves integrate and regulate their own doing and behaving. Knowing the self is more than knowing how one feels. It is also knowing how one thinks and acts.'

Thus an awareness and understanding of the self and what this means for one's role both as a learner and a worker is integral to a reflective approach and needs to be deployed alongside a readiness to review and ponder upon experience. As with reflection upon experience, structured learning opportunities are necessary to facilitate reflection upon the place and the use of the self in relation to work.

An example of such an opportunity within social work education is proposed by Ruch (2002:206) who outlines her use of life maps during initial student group tutorial meetings. This, she maintains:

> 'proved a useful tool for shifting students' thinking at an early stage from a predominantly technical-rational level to one which encourages more practical, critical and process levels of reflection'.

A further purpose of this strategy for Ruch was that it focussed student attention upon the self and:

> 'highlighted the deeply personal roots of people's professional choices and underlined the significance of the personal in the professional and the importance of them being held together in creative tension, rather than artificially divided off from one another'.

A slightly different illustration, but once again relating to social work education, is provided by Dempsey *et al* (2001:638) who offer an account of their development and use of a 'Use of Self' module. They suggest that:

> 'Sharing thoughts and feelings with others through structured opportunities for conversation is an essential element in scaffolding a reflective learning process

that fosters professional self-construction. Through verbalising the internal conversation, reflective learning becomes more concrete'.

With regard the manner in which theory - as one form of knowledge - may be most effectively taught and learned so as to inform work practice, Thompson (2000:3) writes of 'reflective practice...as an important link in the chain of relating theory to practice'. What Thompson is arguing is that the technical rationalism of the competence-based educational approach, which holds that theoretical knowledge can be objectively learned, known and applied to situations in a scientific manner, is inadequate. Numerous other commentators, for example, Fish and Coles (2000) and Fisher and Somerton (2000) endorse this contention. For Thompson, such a view overstates the relevance - in terms of immediate applicability - of much of social science knowledge to often complex and unique human situations and also fails to take sufficient account of the potential contribution of other sources of knowledge such as experience. Debates regarding use of knowledge, in terms of both the competence-based and the reflective approaches, and how this may contribute to the construction of differing forms of professional identity, are explored in more detail in the following chapter. Here, the point is that the relationship between theory and practice is conceptualised by a reflective approach as an inductive process emerging from practice and that learning opportunities may thus be most usefully structured in terms of, for example, the critical incident technique (Wright 1989), Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning or Schon's (1983) framework for 'reflection on action'.

Ixer (1999:514) asserts that 'British professional education during the 1980s and 1990s has used the concept of reflection to spearhead a revolution in adult learning' and attributes this to 'filling the void left by the abandonment of positivist research paradigms and of the logico-deductive method as an orientation to knowledge'. With regard social work education specifically, Ruch (2002:200) suggests that a growth in interest in reflective development has come about as a response to the ascendancy of the competence-based approach in the sense that reflective learning and practice represent a means of tempering the:

> 'reductionist view of social work which believes that, despite the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity in the UK and the emergence of anti-oppressive approaches, there is one 'right' response to specific practice scenarios'.

It is certainly the case that, since 1995, the standard laid down by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW)[3] for qualification by social work students has included the pronouncement that 'It is only practice which is founded on values, carried out in a skilled manner and informed by knowledge, critical analysis and reflection which is competent practice'. Thus a clear relationship between competence and reflection is posited and social work students are called upon to be both competent *and* reflective – or perhaps to attain competence *through* reflection in order to qualify as social work practitioners.

The competence-based and the reflective learning approaches and social work education:

Within the UK formal preparation for the job of social work, taking place within an educational establishment and leading to some form of qualification dates from 1903. A social work course at the London School of Sociology (later incorporated into the London School of Economics) was introduced as a collaborative venture between two of the then key actors in the provision of social care through charitable philanthropy: the Settlement Movement and the Charity Organisation Society (COS) (Rashid 2000). Jones (1983:102) notes that the educational format first proposed by the COS whereby social work students balanced their engagement with traditional university teaching with periods of supervised practice in the field 'still holds to this day'. This innovation by the COS was soon to be followed not only in a number of other university social science departments but also by different social work organisations working with different social groups e.g. the Hospital Almoner's' Council, who developed their own courses and certification (Pierce and Weinstein 2000). Parry and Parry (1979) note that the British

[3] Since 2001, CCETSW has been replaced by its successor the General Social Care Council (GCSS) in England and its partner organisations in Scotland (SSCC), Northern Ireland NISCC) and in Wales (the Care Council for Wales – CCW).

Federation of Social Workers, established in 1936, acted as an umbrella organisation for no less than twelve distinct strands or areas of social work activity. Such diversity, together with an absence of any standard curriculum, led the 1951 Younghusband Report to assert that:

> 'The conclusion of any general survey of preparation for social work seems to be that the situation has got out of hand. Academic freedom, coupled with the rich luxuriance of professional training bodies, has led to something approaching chaos' (1951: para 309).

Notwithstanding the proliferation and variety of preparatory routes for social work, a practice method dating from the mid-eighteenth century beginnings of organised philanthropy, strengthened by the import from American social work of a strongly psychoanalytic influence (Cosis Brown 1996, Munro 1998), and remaining so commonly adopted amongst social workers as to be almost universal was that of social casework. The strength of this trend, alongside the recommendations of the 1951 Younghusband Report for a more unified and commonly applicable form of social work education, led to the introduction in 1954 of generic casework social work education courses. A further contribution by Younghusband (Ministry of Health 1959) was the identification of how very few social workers had had the opportunity to undertake relevant education or held any form of recognised social work qualification. Parry and Parry (1979:36) point to the growing legislative framework of social work during the inter-war years as indicative of a growing engagement between social work and the state and thus formalisation of the role of social worker: 'Convergence was demonstrated by the increasing similarity both of professional training and orientation in statutory and voluntary agencies alike'. Another theme in the development of social work as an occupation had been what Hugman (1998:178) terms 'an overt concern with the process of professionalisation'. These considerations signalled the need for more and more standardised educational preparation for social work and resulted in two-year, non-graduate but certificated social work courses being initiated in colleges of higher and further education (Pierce and Weinstein 2000).

In 1971 the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) was established. This heralded an attempt 'to bring together professional, academic, employment and government interests' (Pierce and Weinstein 2000:11) in relation to social work education. The immediate task for CCETSW was to respond to the needs of employers i.e. the new generic social services departments being formulated at that time in the wake of the 1968 Seebohm Report (Stevenson 2005). Also, to draw together and standardise the range of social work qualifying courses still in existence (Horner 2006). This was achieved through the introduction of the one or two year (depending upon whether the student was already a graduate), higher education based single generic qualification: the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW). Consultation and review in relation to the CQSW undertaken during the 1980s amongst educationalists and employers lead to the proposal by CCETSW that social work education be extended to three years. This, it was argued, would bring social work education in line with European standards as well as those of other UK caring professions. The proposal was rejected by government as too costly (Pierce and Weinstein 2000). Instead, a two year Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) was introduced in 1989. This was organised on the basis of partnerships between educational institutions and local employers and influenced by a managerialist emphasis upon technical skills linked to defined tasks (Sibeon 1991). This influence, within the context of the ascendency of the competence-based school of thinking in relation to preparation for employment, centrally informed the review and revision of the DipSW in 1995 and its formal emergence as a competence-based qualification.

The impetus for three year, graduate level social work education continued, however, and in 2001 the introduction of a new social work degree, encompassing a practice qualification, was announced. A review of the DipSW, commissioned by the health departments of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, had been undertaken throughout 1998-99 and had encompassed consultation within each of the four countries. It recommended 'a significant strengthening of the curriculum which will have the effect of requiring a three-year course leading to a degree' (J M Consulting 1999). Based on a Code of Conduct (DOH 1998) and National Occupational Standards for Social Care

(TOPPS 2000), the introduction of the new degree throughout the UK commenced in 2002.

The historical development of social work education frames and facilitates the identification of certain themes and issues relevant to a discussion of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. For instance, Jones (1983:101), writing of the introduction of social work courses by the Charity Organisation Society, notes 'the COS's decision to switch from reliance on apprenticeship modes of *training* to formal social work *education*'. Jones notes the concerns expressed by commentators at that time that practically-based training should feature in but not dominate social work courses for fear of 'work by dead rule instead of by living principles' (Bosanquet 1900:52) or because 'alone it may leave the learner rather limited by routine' (Holman 1914:83). It is Jones's contention that this concern with education was primarily politically motivated so as to imbue students - as a kind of socialisation - with the COS ideology of idealism and individualism. Whether this was so or not, the point is demonstrated that, from the time of its inception, formal preparation for social work has addressed the distinction between education and training. This is important because, whilst it would be wrong to overstate a connection between work-based training and the competence-based approach, it is usually the case that work based training, like some of the definitions of the competence-based approach, is context specific and focuses upon the job rather than the person.

Also writing of this era however, Munro (1998:37) refers to the work of Mary Richmond who, in 1917, wrote 'the first major social work textbook *Social Diagnosis*' in which she sought to outline the methods and practices of the COS. Munro notes Richmond's belief 'that caseworkers should use scientific ways of investigation and recording so that they can develop their own theories about the causes and cures of poverty' and, further, that Richmond 'did not draw on theories from the social sciences but envisaged that caseworkers would develop theories from their experience'. Here then an explicit link emerges between the educational principles of the COS and the reflective learning approach in terms of inductive thinking and use of experience as a source of knowledge. These analyses by Jones and by Munro suggest that attempts have been made by

preparatory social work courses since their earliest beginnings to simultaneously operate if not a competence-based approach then certainly a work based training model alongside a more reflective learning approach.

Similar observations can be made in relation to the manner in which UK social work education developed throughout the twentieth century. For example during much of the last century, social work practice and thus education was very heavily influenced both by psychoanalytic theory and a psychodynamic perspective, an import from Central Europe via the USA. In relation to this theoretical perspective, Payne (1997:78) observes as follows:

> 'there was a period in which it was dominant, until the end of the 1960s. During this period it formed so powerful an influence that it created approaches within social work that remain to this day.'

The emphasis within this approach upon the therapeutic relationship between service user and social worker and the use of self by the worker to facilitate this in terms of concepts such as transference is summarised by Nathan (1997:234) in the following way: 'a fundamental of psychoanalytic thinking is that the most important resource at the worker's disposal, is the worker herself'. In educational terms then, far from being amenable to functional analysis of tasks and techniques, this perspective clearly calls for a reflective focus upon the person and for self-awareness by the worker.

During this same period, however, social work education and training may be seen as having become more visibly and immediately linked to the needs and interests of employers and of government. This is witnessed by the ever-increasing legislative context of post-war welfare and the role of local authority employed social workers in operationalising this (Parry and Parry 1979). When CCETSW came into being in 1971 it had a clear mandate to harness social work education and employment through engaging employers in direct consultation as to the pre-requisites of social work education (Pierce and Weinstein 2000). Such employer influence upon educational processes and content is not necessarily synonymous with the competence-based approach but is certainly

indicative of it (Eurat 1994). Furthermore, a series of enquiries, most notably into child care social work practice, throughout the 1970's and 1980's led to calls for greater professional accountability by social workers (Stevenson 2005). Questions were raised about the nature of social work training and education that were responded to by the introduction of the DipSW (Ellis and Thorpe 1999, Horner 2006).

As previously stated, the DipSW, as the most recent former vehicle of social work education, is commonly recognised as a competence-based qualification. It required students to provide evidence of their activities in relation to six specific areas of competence, or 'core competences': to communicate and engage, to promote and enable, to assess and plan, to intervene and provide, to work in organisations and to develop professional competence.

In order to demonstrate these competences to a satisfactory i.e. qualifying, standard the DipSW required social work students to apply what O'Hagan (1996:12) terms 'the three foundational pillars of social work competence', namely the knowledge, skills and values that underpin their actions in relation to each area of competence. Knowledge in this context refers to knowledge derived from a range of related disciplines (e.g. sociology, social policy, psychology etc.), of relevant law, policy and procedure, of theories and methods of social work and of research. Writing within the context of social work, Thompson (2000:81-2) describes a skill as 'the ability to carry out a particular activity effectively and consistently over time'. O'Hagan (1996), however, maintains that skills and competence are far from synonymous but, rather, that a skill embodies an intellectual dimension that differentiates it from mere technical expertise and is centrally informed by a value base. Banks (2006:4) defines values in social work as 'a set of fundamental moral/ethical principles to which social workers are/should be committed'. As with areas of task performance, CCETSW (1998) prescribed a framework of six central values that it required to be taught, learned and assessed on social work programmes. Rather than treated as distinct from or additional to the core competences, these values needed to be demonstrated by students as integral to and underpinning their actions in relation to each of the areas of competence. For example, when a student demonstrated their capacity 'to

communicate and engage' with others, they also needed to show how their actions were informed and influenced by a value such as 'identify and question own values and their implications for practice'. Thus a clear connection or link emerges between technical proficiency with regard communication (competence) and enquiry and self-awareness in relation to that communication (reflection).

The core competences and values were seen as relevant to social work education as a whole and thus expected to underpin, inform and permeate the curriculum generally. As a higher education qualification, however, social work programmes have been simultaneously expected to respond to the requirement that students demonstrate a capacity for critical analysis and, by implication, for reflection (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 1999). Again, this is an illustration of the duality of educational emphases or models by which social work education appears characterised. Most tangibly, however, the core competences related to the periods of assessed practice incorporated within the DipSW. Here an agency-based practice teacher played a key role in that, as well as developing learning opportunities aimed at facilitating the student's demonstration of the requisite competences and values and assessing the student's production of evidence in relation to these, the practice teacher was required enable the student 'to critically reflect on use of self and impact on others' and, ultimately, 'to assist the student to become a critical and reflective practitioner' (CCETSW 1996: 17-19).

Collectively these observations suggest that social work education has long been positioned at a kind of interface between competence-based and reflective approaches – or at least elements thereof. Suggestions by contemporary commentators that social work education embodies an 'impasse' (Horder 1998: 120) or is 'caught in a struggle' (Ruch 2002:2) between these differing educational approaches imply that this is a recent phenomenon. It may reasonably be proposed, however, that social work education has been characterised since its very inception by such duality.

The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches:

For some proponents, the competence-based approach represents a clear design for recognising and incorporating employer interests within social work education. In addition, the interests and rights of service users are promoted in the sense that the competence-based approach specifies and makes explicit what can be expected of qualified social workers and thus serves to demystify 'professional' social work (Pierce and Weinstein 2000). In this view the competence-based approach is seen as an important vehicle for ensuring that social work education is immediately relevant to the demands of the job in contemporary terms and for reassuring employers that practitioners, at the point of qualification, are indeed 'fit for practice'. Moreover, the users of social work services can feel confident that a visible and transparent framework for the education of practitioners exists and is directly employment-related thereby rendering tangible what it is that social workers are supposed to be able to do – public accountability, in short.

Linked to this perceived strength of the competence-based educational approach is the notion that it has the potential to empower traditionally disadvantaged groups – as represented by both students and service users – through its clarity and systematic structure and the limitations these place upon the possibility of subjective judgement in assessment (Mansfield and Mitchell 1996). Writing of competence-based social work education, O'Hagan (1996:16) notes that 'its concentration on evidence certainly minimises the possibilities of the abuse of power within the tutor, student and practice teacher relationship'. A focus on what a student can actually show that they can do (as opposed to more implicit attributes) may also increase access to qualified social worker status by a wider, and not necessarily traditional, student group. This is of especial significance within the world of social care, which is so often characterised by low pay and by the employment of women in low status and non-secure posts (Kelly and Horder 2001).

In relation to interprofessional practice – an increasingly common context for social work – Barr (1998) points to the usefulness of the competence framework in enabling workers from different disciplines to map commonalties between their respective core tasks and functions, and thus the contribution made by the competence-based approach to the breaking down or overcoming of out-dated occupational boundaries, the better to achieve integrated service provision.

As well as these positive qualities, a number of weaknesses of the competence-based approach – certainly in relation to social work education – have been asserted. Collins (1991:45) expresses concern that this approach is reductionist and limited in its conceptualisation of knowledge in the following terms: 'a narrow technicist approach to education which defines knowledge in the light of bureaucratic and corporate needs'. Hyland (1995:50) frames a criticism on the basis of the behaviourist theoretical orientation from which the competence-based approach is largely derived and denounces this as a: 'minimalist and impoverished conception of human thought and action' that does not 'account adequately for key aspects of human reasoning, understanding and learning'. These concerns are brought together and summarised by Pietroni (1995:64):

> 'education driven only by a search for competence is likely to promote a narrow, technicist, minimalist and dogmatic approach at the expense of concern with intellectual enquiry and social analysis, with processes of learning, with the cognitive and ethical foundations of professional practice, and with the idiosyncratic and creative aspects of practice (the artistry) which lie at its heart.'

What these writers are claiming in essence is that competence-based education, within the social work context at least, is overly mechanistic to the point of resembling a factory production line and marginalises the significance of knowledge at the expense of technical 'know how'.

Kelly and Horder (2001:692) call even the validity of such technical proficiency into question by highlighting that the notions of competence upon which the educational model rests are in fact derived from occupational standards that are likely to have been in place for some time and that do not embody the flexibility necessary for continual

updating. For Kelly and Horder then: 'competences suffer from built-in obsolescence; they are inevitably based on yesterday's practice'. Building upon the assertion by Norris (1991:334) that 'a significant feature of models of competence is that in their tidiness and precision, far from preserving the essential features of expertise, they distort and understate the very things they are trying to represent', Kemshall (1993:42) also focuses on the standard setting upon which social work education competences are based and claims that, far from being empowering of disadvantaged groups, the competence framework is reliant upon a formulation by white middle class males and hence is inherently discriminatory and oppressive in nature. For example, Kemshall observes that the social work education competence framework is a:

> 'White assessment scheme which may value the virtues of authority and assertion above those of humility and self-effacement....at present the competences are intrinsically bound up with white values and as such they are white competences.'

Whilst this may be argued to apply to any dominant curriculum framework, it must be remembered that an important aspect of social work education is that of preparing students to work with disadvantaged social groups. Issitt (1995:83) rhetorically endorses this view: 'does the inevitably individualistic, technically rational response perpetuate structural inequalities while giving an illusion of tackling oppression?' Hence for some critics of the competence-based approach, the foundational standards underpinning and informing competences may be fundamentally problematic in themselves and so taint any framework of competences to which they give rise.

Another way in which the competence-based approach is seen to disadvantage rather than to empower is in its apparent predilection for a 'proliferation of bureaucracy and jargon and an over-emphasis upon methodology with the use of terms such as 'units', 'elements', 'performance criteria' and 'range statements' which are understood only by specialists, (Kelly and Horder 2001:691). Linked to this concern is that of Doel (2000: 160) who suggests that repetition and over assessment are central features of the competence-based approach to the extent that 'the assessment tail is in danger of wagging the learning dog'. Yet, as Eurat (1994) points out, despite the preoccupation with the

production of evidence and the appraisal of this, the competences form a base line for the assessment of minimum standards rather than of best practice. Horder (1998:118) who contends that the competence-based approach focuses on 'minimum adequacy rather than excellence' concurs with this analysis as do Knight and Worsley (1998:15) when they refer to the phrase 'competent social work' as meaning 'adequate rather than able'. Here then is the suggestion that notwithstanding the attempt made by the NCVQ to produce a compound definition that amalgamates and embraces both the 'competency' and the 'competence' conceptual schools, the competence-based approach in social work education fails to enable differential assessment.

For almost every proposed advantage or benefit of the competence-based approach then there exists a counter-argument that questions or denies the espoused strength. Similarly, reflective learning is often appraised on the basis of drawing contrasts – which may be positive or negative – with the competence-based approach. This, of course, heightens the perception of the two approaches as essentially at odds with one another, as oppositional and even conflictual rather than as mutually complementary counterparts. The merits of the reflective learning approach, for example, are often expounded simply on the basis of comparing it favourably with the competence-based approach. For instance, the competence-based educational approach is seen as being situationally specific and thus as at risk of fragmenting learning (Manley and Garbett 2000). The reflective learning approach, in contrast, is claimed to offer and enable more holistic learning and to facilitate the transferability of this across diverse circumstances (Kelly and Horder 2001). Equally, the competence-based approach has been challenged as disempowering of already disadvantaged groups within society (Kemshall 1993, Issitt 1995) whilst the emphasis upon the person and of self-awareness and the use of experience embodied within reflective learning implies that this approach, in contrast, seeks to hear and to celebrate even the voices of all learners and so is inclusive.

The relationship between social work theory and practice has long been perceived as problematic (Sheldon 1978, Barbour 1984, Fisher 1997). Thompson (2000) proposes that this is essentially because workers perceive 'theory' in technical-rational terms - as

scientific knowledge to be learned and deductively applied. Effective application relies then on such knowledge being retained confidently by workers, ready for use in practice. The ideas of Schon (1983) and Kolb (1984) suggest an alternative approach to theorising social work practice that hinges upon reflection. Through a reflective learning approach that equips workers for reflective practice, it is argued, knowledge is inducted from practice experience and thus is part of a single and integrated process.

For Schon (1983), the technical rationalism associated with the competence-based approach failed to provide the worker with an understanding, or analytic framework, that would enable them to process and respond to complex, even potentially dangerous situations sufficiently rapidly. Reflective learning, however, leading to the capacity for 'reflection-in-action' was argued by Schon to equip workers to make decisions and problem-solve promptly and effectively. Nonetheless, despite the concern that the competence-based approach demonstrates no more than 'a spurious scientific respectability' (Cooper 2008:226), there is an equal concern that a reflective learning and practice approach may amount to little more than confession and, as Bolton (2005: 5) points out, such confession may be 'a conforming mechanism' and have 'a seductive quality because it passes responsibility to others.'

Perhaps one of the gravest criticisms of the reflective developmental approach is the lack of clarity and agreement as to precisely how it may be defined. Here again, however, the counter-argument that what is meant by the competence-based approach is equally unclear may be mounted. Nonetheless, the charge that what is understood by 'reflection' and thus what is meant by reflective learning is unclear remains a formidable criticism within the context of the assessment of students. Ixer (1999:520) contends that 'we simply do not have the assessment tools to measure what students are doing when they are reflecting'. In the main, however, whilst clearly distinct from competence-based education, the reflective learning approach seems often be appraised in terms of its capacity to respond to and to remedy the deficits of the competence-based approach.

Summary:

In summary this chapter has sought to trace and clarify the origins of each of the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches and to examine and clarify some of the different ways in which these have been defined and understood. A brief overview of the historical development of UK social work education, from its inception up until the era of the DipSW, has been offered and the development and application of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches considered within this context. Finally certain of the respective strengths and weaknesses of each of the approaches have been explored.

From this discussion a range of questions emerge: how do social work educators and learners understand, operationalise and experience the approaches? Are the approaches seen as antithetical or is there perceived scope for mutual use of and harmonising between the two? Where and how, within each of the university and agency-based aspects of the DipSW provision, and within DipSW programmes overall, are these approaches demonstrated? It is with these questions, and others emerging from the ensuing chapter, that this research enquiry is centrally concerned.

Chapter Three: Models of Professional Social Work

Introduction

The preceding chapter sought to outline the debate as to the relevance and effectiveness of competence-based and reflective models of learning for social work education and training. This chapter aims to extend and deepen this context through consideration of the underpinning relationship between the respective models of learning and professionalism within social work. Questions regarding whether social work can or should be deemed a professional occupation, the type of professional identity by which social work is most appropriately characterised, and how this is facilitated by pre-qualifying preparation for social work may be seen as immediately connected with questions regarding the place and use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. This is because these approaches to learning both arise from and, in turn, give rise to, the character and nature of qualified social work. This chapter seeks to address these questions by considering in turn: the historical development of UK social work in relation to professionalisation, the questioning of traditional notions of professionalism, and the conceptualisations of professional identity that have emerged in response to this. Finally, the connections that may be discerned between certain of these conceptual typologies indicating different kinds of professional identity, and the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches are discussed.

'The longest running show in town'

Debate as to whether social work can or cannot and should or should not be regarded as a profession has been taking place since the emergence of social work as a recognisably distinct occupational area (Hugman 1998, Rashid 2000). This debate continues:

> 'We need to refine our concepts when considering the nature of social work's status as a profession and ask ourselves not just whether social work is a profession or not, but to what extent and in what ways it is a profession.'
>
> (Burt and Worsley 2008: 27)

Hence the reference by Webb and Wistow (1987:190) to such longevity - and continuation - of interest and concern as 'the longest running show in town.' There appear to be two main strands to the debate: first, the question of whether social work can lay claim to the occupational traits associated with more traditionally established groups such as the medical and legal professions. Second is the issue of whether social work should in fact seek to professionalise. Each of these strands hold in common, however, the view that attempts to clarify the relationship between social work and professionalisation need to take place within an understanding of the historical origins and development of social work. Through the historical overview outlined in this section, the ways in which each of these strands has been debated are considered.

Firstly, however, it is useful to discuss briefly how what constitutes a 'profession', as distinct from an occupation, has traditionally been understood. In other words, what it is that social work has been measured against. A particularly influential approach to defining and understanding professionalism has been that of 'trait' theorising. This involves the use of a number of traits or characteristics to identify certain occupational areas as professions and to differentiate these from other forms of labour activity. Numerous trait theorists over time have put forward proposals as to the defining characteristics of professionalism. Many of these are helpfully drawn together and summarised by Rothman (1998: 64) as follows: a profession is:

- an occupation that draws upon a distinct body of expertise or knowledge; theoretical or scientific knowledge, practical knowledge and informed use of technique or skills;
- an occupation that is prepared for through recognised and particular forms of education leading to specific qualification;
- an occupation characterised by monopoly or exclusivity whereby the right to practice is vested in the holders of specific qualifications only and such occupational closure is enshrined within law;
- an occupation that enjoys some level of autonomy i.e. can self-regulate as to its own affairs and operation and can present itself as having sufficient integrity for such internal self-regulation to have external credibility;

- an occupation wherein expertise, ethical codes of practice, monopoly and autonomy are harnessed, serviced and developed through means of a professional association which also serves to protect and promote professional status and recognition.

Many accounts of the development of formalised systems of social welfare in the UK take as their starting point the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. This Act replaced the locally financed and administered poor relief that had been available, certainly in England, since the early 1600s. The 1834 Poor Law introduced a centralised system of state support for the poor at a level of minimum subsistence and in the form of the workhouse. Workhouse institutions were run by staff recruited and paid to offer both social care and to exert social control in respect of inmates. Thus 'These workers became the basis of a paid social work profession' (Payne 2005:33). Such official state intervention co-existed alongside church-based philanthropic activity, however, and whilst much of this was of a voluntary nature, it was here that Parry and Parry (1979:23) maintain that 'The first sign of modern social work appeared during the 1850s with the introduction of paid welfare work activities'. Cree (2008:294) refers to 'an explosion of voluntary activity in the nineteenth century, with the creation of hundreds of new philanthropic agencies.' For instance, Barnardo's was founded in 1866, the Children's Society in 1881 and the NSPCC in 1889 (Tossell and Webb 1994). In particular, the Settlement Movement, which was a church-based (initially Anglican but later extended to include non-Anglicans) missionary enterprise aimed at underpinning social and moral development on the part of the poor with the provision of knowledge through education, was, in Parry and Parry's terms 'another important element in the formation of social work as an institution and an occupation' (1979:24).

Another important contributor, both to the provision of social welfare generally and to the origins of social work specifically, was the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in 1901. Wilson *et al* (2008:50) note that: 'Many historical accounts identify the COS as a key element in the formation of the occupation of social work.' The COS was concerned that material relief from poverty should be administered systematically and on the basis of assessment of both need and circumstance. Further, that rather than the

apparently relatively unconditional giving by certain philanthropic groups or the repressive and punitively conditional assistance available under the auspices of the Poor Law, aid should be accompanied by advice aimed at promoting, even teaching, self-reliance and eventual self-sufficiency. Jones (1983:81) outlines a central characteristic of the COS as follows:

> 'One of the principal objectives of the COS's founding members was to transform philanthropy from an unskilled 'duty' of the rich to an expert and professional activity undertaken only by those who were prepared by social theory and trained in appropriate methods.'

For the COS, the most 'appropriate method' was that of social casework, an individualised approach to problem diagnosis and intervention described by Payne (2005:38) in the following way: 'The method of detailed home assessment and personal influence by a professional allied to practical help.'

So it may be seen that the origins of modern UK social work stem from three main sources of influence: the Poor Law of 1834, the Settlement Movement and the COS (Horner 2006). Underlying each of these was the belief that moral improvement and material aid went hand in hand. What differed was the means by which this was best achieved. Notwithstanding such difference, however, and as noted in Chapter Two, the first UK education and training programme for social work was launched jointly between the Settlement Movement and the COS in 1903. This appears to indicate a clear strategic attempt to professionalise the activity of social work since it involved the formal assertion of a distinct body of knowledge and repertoire of skills for social work – expertise, in short. Moreover, the attainment of this 'expert' status through specific training represented a means of closure against the untrained thus creating a monopoly over social welfare work. This intention appears to be borne out by the remarks of Charles Loch, the then secretary of the COS, who explicitly claimed a parallel between the medical profession and social work when he stated 'Doctors have to be educated methodically, registered and certificated. Charity is the work of the social physician.' (1906: xix). This perception of social welfare work as a professional activity is

challenged, however, by Rashid (2000) who argues that the twin aims of the COS – systematic administration (of material relief) and moral improvement through rescue (not only from destitution but also from the crime and vice believed to be associated with poverty) – were not congruent with professional activity. For Rashid, the first of these aims was essentially procedural and the second vocational and thus neither should be conceptualised as professional in nature.

Early social workers seem then to have been concerned with professionalising their trade almost from the outset and to have believed that a legitimate claim to the traits associated with professionalisation processes could be made on behalf of social work. Equally, however, there is the analysis, offered for instance by Rashid (2000), that contends that this was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the social work role. Hugman (1998) provides a further perspective with the suggestion that the concern of early social workers to assert professional standing was not any form of conceit (that is, an attempt to become associated with elite social groups), but because they believed that enhancement of the status of paid charitable work would lead to a corresponding improvement in levels and standards of social welfare. Whatever the motivation of social work to professionalise at the beginning of the 1900s may have been, by the inter-war years the tradition of psychiatric social work had developed and this laid unequivocal claim to professional status on the basis of specialist training resulting in the possession by psychiatric social workers of a distinct body of scientific knowledge and clinical expertise. Psychiatric social workers also enjoyed a closer relationship with psychiatric doctors than their more generic counterparts and thus were imbued with professional status almost by association (Jordan 1984). This was reflected by the establishment in 1930 of a professional body (The Association of Psychiatric Social Workers) which was modelled upon those of the medical profession and, like these, restricted entry on the basis of qualification (Rashid 2000). Parry and Parry (1979:35) summarise this period in UK social work history by stating: 'The growth of psychiatric social work and the use of psychological theory as a basis for casework strengthened the movement towards professionalism in social work.'

By the mid-part of the last century a number and variety of distinct strands of social work activity had emerged (e.g. hospital almoners, probation officers, educational welfare work) supported by various different training courses. Although not all of these social work personas enjoyed the burgeoning professional credibility of psychiatric social work, the extent and range of social work organisations in existence by this time meant that social work was no longer attributed the relatively marginal status of philanthropic charitable endeavour by which it had been characterised some fifty years earlier. As much as social work was gaining more of a presence as a mainstream occupation, however, the perception of it as a professional activity was also being somewhat undermined by the almost bewildering array of sources and types of preparatory training. This was described by Younghusband (1951: para 309) as 'something approaching chaos' (see Chapter Two: 'The competence-based and the reflective learning approaches and social work education').

Cree (2008) refers to the post Second World War welfare reforms within the UK as resulting in a growing convergence between the state and social work activity. Or, as Payne (2005:55) puts it: 'The professional focus of social work shifted from the voluntary sector to public services.' On the one hand, legislation such as the Children, the Criminal Justice and the National Assistance Acts of 1948 brought much of social work more clearly and firmly within the apparatus of government than ever previously and so diluted the autonomy of social work. On the other hand, however, the paternalistic nature of this welfare legislation invested social workers with discretion of judgement and decision-making powers underpinned by the authority of the state (Bean 1980). Rashid (2000:320) writes of these processes as extending the remit of social workers resulting in their becoming 'professionals by default'. A further effect of this development was increased integration between the various different strands of social work activity and unified, generic social work training was introduced (see Chapter Two: 'The competence-based and the reflective learning approaches and social work education').

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a period of considerable expansion of social work in the UK. Of particular note was the 1968 Seebohm Report, on the basis of which single

generic social services departments were created within local government (Tossell and Webb 1994). Successive reorganisations of both social and health care arrangements resulted in statutory social workers becoming: 'the primary providers of all major social services in an influential local government department' (Payne 2005:85). Payne (2000) points out that these developments resulted in a new form of independence for social work in terms of becoming recognised as a distinct sphere of activity, separate from other forms of welfare such as health provision. Flowing from this, social work decisions began to attain legitimacy in their own right and were no longer wholly subordinate to those made by other professional groups. Payne (2000:23 describes this period as 'the higher water-mark of the movement for the professionalisation of social work in Britain.'

In 1971 both the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) were formed (see Chapter Two). At the same time as social work expansion then, unified organisation was occurring that drew together the separate strands of social work provision and education and reduced the earlier sense of multiple and disparate activity. These developments gave rise to a climate in which, as Rashid (2000:323) puts it: 'Hopes for increased recognition of social work's claims to professional status were high.'

This is not a full picture, however, of the manner in which the relationship between social work and professionalisation unfolded during this era. The high hopes alluded to by Rashid (2000) were counter-balanced by a shift away from professionalism as a desirable goal for social work. At the same time as appearing to endorse social work's claim to be viewed as a profession by, for instance, emphasising the need for training and career development opportunities for social workers, the 1968 Seebohm Report had recommended locally focussed social work services. This gave rise to increased attention to community relations and proactive and preventative work within this context thereby creating the conditions for the emergence of community social work (Payne 2005). A fundamental principle of such a community based approach is that problems – whether at an individual or local level – are best understood and addressed on the basis of commonly held knowledge and shared assessment between practitioners and local people. The

notion of lay people as experts on their own situations represented a radical challenge to the conceptualisation of practitioner as expert (and thus as professional). Furthermore, the community based approach rested on the delivery of services by a range of non-social work employees providing domiciliary services such as home care and meals on wheels (Hadley and McGrath 1980). As these employees became incorporated within social services departments, the sense of these organisations as professional social work bases inevitably became diluted.

For many local authority social workers, the goal of professionalisation was very much at odds with the aims of social work which were increasingly coming to be understood as exposing and challenging the structural causes of social problems (Bailey and Brake 1975). This rather more radical and critical approach on the part of social work practitioners was evident throughout both the statutory and the voluntary sectors. Rather than possessing expertise to be exercised in the relatively paternalistic manner associated with the earlier social work role, this more radical approach espoused solidarity with service users in a joint effort to counter structural disadvantage and inequality. Cree (2003:2), drawing on the work of Langan (1993), captures this period as follows:

> 'During the 1970's and 1980's, radical social workers drew attention to the 'social control' aspects of social work practice, and argued instead for a social work practice which aligned itself more fully with service users and the trade union movement (Langan 1993). There was a feeling that the only legitimate social work was community social work or community development; all other kinds of social work were about maintaining the status quo and keeping poor people down.'

Hugman (1988) observes that the radical social work movement conceptualised itself in terms of skilled labour, as an occupation rather than a profession. This was seen as a more effective means of developing alliance with service users, as opposed to the dominant elite professional classes who were perceived as perpetuating structural inequality through the illegitimate exercise of power and authority. Thus 'The professionalisation of social work was criticised as being potentially to the advantage of the professionals but not to the people who use their services' (Payne 2005:90).Within

the voluntary sector also a more critical view of state welfare was being formed with an increased emphasis upon advocacy on behalf of service users being adopted. For instance, Payne (2005) cites the manner in which the National Association for Mental Health (a body formed during the 1940s with the aim of providing a forum of shared interest for those working within the field of mental health) had, by the early 1960s reformulated itself into a campaigning organisation in relation to patients' civil rights. This period in social work's history can be seen then as embodying twin and contradictory pressures in relation to the question of the professionalisation of social work.

Throughout its history, social work has become increasingly associated with the organisational context in which it takes place and thus may be seen as having developed into an essentially bureaucratised activity (Payne 2000). For some commentators (for example Toren 1972), this absence of flexibility has meant that social work cannot be conceptualised as a profession. Instead, Etzioni's concept of the 'semi-profession' becomes relevant. Etzioni (1969: v) outlined the characteristics of a semi-profession as follows:

> Their training is shorter, their status is less legitimised, their right to privileged communication less established, there is less of a specialised body of knowledge and they have less autonomy from supervision or societal control than 'the' professions.'

Others, however, such as Parry and Parry (1979) and Harris (1999) describe the role of social work as that of a 'bureau-professional'. This refers to a kind of negotiated trade-off or compromise between organisational bureaucracy and professionalism wherein the characteristics of each are preserved - but each within the context of the other. Over the last twenty five years or so, however, much of social work, particularly within the statutory sector, has been characterised not only by bureaucratisation but also by managerialism (Pollitt 1993). In essence managerialism means the management styles and practices formerly associated with private sector commerce becoming transferred and applied to public welfare services, including social work. This involves a growth in

emphasis upon economic rationalism and a concern with, even a prioritisation of, technical competence as opposed to professional wisdom. Hugman (1983:186), for instance, notes that:

> 'what has changed in the last two decades is that at the most senior levels of large bureaucratic organizations there has been the growing influence of a form of managerialism which separates professional and organizational seniority, giving precedence to the latter.'

Thus the professional element of bureau-professionalism is undermined and social workers become organisational operators within a framework of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. The conceptual differences between technical competence and the exercise of professional wisdom are discussed further below.

The shift in the orientation of social work from a more welfarist approach, primarily concerned with the social issues relevant to human need, to one more centrally to do with the organisation and management of service provision (Harris 2002) may be explained as arising from a number of sources. First, a number of highly publicised instances of what Payne (2005:94) terms 'service failures'. By this he means episodes where services have proved ineffective - with serious consequences for service users - and which have been widely reported and scrutinised and commented upon by the public. The most obvious examples of such service failures are probably child protection cases, particularly those where children have been killed. One result of such cases has been heightened public scepticism as to the credibility of social work and a view that organisational change is needed for social work to be effective. Further pressures for increased evidence of management within social work have included political critiques that have been essentially anti-welfare and anti-community and that have characterised social work as encouraging dependency. During the years of Thatcherism, for example, individual economic activity through employment was emphasised by the government as the most effective form of social care provision (Timmins 1996) and the service commissioning role – as opposed to that of direct provision – for social work became prioritised. The cutting back or reining in of public expenditure on social services that was a central

feature of successive Conservative administrations during the 1980s and 1990s has not so much been reversed by the advent of New Labour as re-directed. Thus a shift in emphasis has emerged that has centred on quality assurance and regulation aimed at promoting the effectiveness and responsiveness of social work. The Care Standards Act 2000, for example, explicitly addressed procedures for the regular review of statutory social services and for the registration of both social workers and social care workers. This managerialist focus has, to some extent, superseded the issue of whether social work should be seen as primarily concerned with the role of organisational bureaucrat or with the exercise of professional discretion (Burt and Worsley 2008).

From this brief overview of the history of UK social work it may be seen that the question of whether social work may or should be perceived as a profession is of a complex and contested nature – and that it has been ever thus throughout social work's development over the course of the last century. This history of ambiguity has led Rashid (2000:316) to summarise in terms of 'a persistent ambivalence towards the whole issue of professionalization' on the part of social workers who have sought alternately 'to professionalize, to de-professionalize and to re-professionalize.' It may be argued that an increasingly significant and informing dimension of this contested question as to the relationship between social work and professionalism is a question as to the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within pre-qualifying preparation for social work. An explicit association would seem to exist between the competence-based approach to learning that emphasises technical rationality and a form of social work characterised by bureaucratic procedure and regulation. Equally, clear parallels may be drawn between the reflective learning approach, and its concern with critical enquiry and inductive reasoning, and a social work identity premised upon creativity and the exercise of discretion in responding to the complexities and uncertainties of human need.

'The transformation of professionalism':

This section of discussion considers more recent trends relating to the question of how a relationship between social work and professionalism may be conceptualised. Davies (2000) writes of a 'transformation of professionalism'. By this she is referring to the questioning of more traditional notions of what constitutes a profession (e.g. the 'trait' theorising illustrated in the previous section). Furthermore, the nature of 'traditional' professionalism itself has been questioned and found wanting. This has created a kind of vacuum that has been responded to by the development of a new and different type of theorising that has concerned itself primarily with the how rather than the what of professionalism. So, ideas have emerged that seek to analyse the varying forms of professional identity that may be discerned. The impetus for this has come from two directions: first, the argument that it is insufficient, perhaps even an over-simplification, to identify and list a series of traits or attributes that characterise a profession and then to compare these with different occupations to see if there is a match. This kind of analysis fails to explain why some occupations (e.g. nursing and the probation service), despite being able to assert the traits characterising professionalism, may yet fail to achieve professional standing in terms of public perception. Secondly, over the last forty years, a multi-faceted critique of the notion of professionalism itself (however it may be described) has emerged and gathered momentum. This stems from a range of different sources and perspectives. At the heart of such critiques, however, lies a very similar issue to the concern regarding the explanatory insufficiency of trait theorising. The issue is that of professional power, authority and status.

The style and mode of operation of areas of occupational life traditionally accorded the status of a profession began to come under open critical scrutiny during the late 1960's. Writers such as Friedson (1970) and Illich (1975, 1977) presented analyses of the exercise of professional authority. Their work posed a fundamental challenge to established styles and perceptions of professional operation by pointing to the potential for misuse of power and for the disempowerment of service users and others enshrined within the ideal of professional dominance. Such critiques were effective in

demonstrating the construction of professional status as founded upon an assumption of superior knowledge and expertise and social role and function maintained through systematic exclusionary devices. Friedson, Illich and others articulating similar ideas were in tune with the more radical thinking regarding social arrangements generally that characterised this era.

This was a time and a climate that also witnessed significant growth in the nature and confidence of service user movements. An extensive and diverse range of self-help and self-advocacy groups began to develop. These challenged the traditionally established and accepted notion of professional authority on the grounds that this concentrated power in professional hands to a questionable extent. Instead, they called for more participative forms of engagement that would not automatically assume superior wisdom on the part of professionals and would create space in which the voice of the service user could be heard more clearly and forcefully than previously (Beresford and Trevillion 1995, Warren 2007).

Much of the critical thinking of this type initially centred on the medical profession and used this to illustrate many of the concerns regarding inappropriate professional dominance. However, such critical ideas were gradually applied more widely to encompass not only occupational groups asserting professional status generally but those associated with the provision of health and social care specifically, including social work. This then was the context for the uncertainty and ambivalence regarding professionalisation within social work that was referred to in the previous section.

A further and linked influence indicating a need for the recasting of the traditional conceptualisation of the professions has been an increased emphasis upon consumerism. Individuals as consumers have come to be viewed as having rights in terms of quality and choice (Tossell and Webb 1994). This relates not only to the purchase of material goods and services but also to public services including welfare provision. The introduction of the Patient's Charter illustrates this clearly. The service user as consumer is recognised as having a spectrum of rights in relation to the standard and manner of delivery of the care

that they receive. Theoretically at least, the service user is no longer seen as meekly subordinate to professional authority and control imposed on a top-down basis. Instead, service users are perceived as potential active partners in a collaborative engagement wherein they contribute to and inform assessment, and where intervention takes place through a process of shared and negotiated planning.

The existence of a range of barriers to the achievement of such full and active partnership is undeniable. Braye (2000), for example, notes that service users may be debarred from participation alongside professionals through the processes of stigma and stereotyping. The capacity of service users to contribute to judgements about and planning for their needs and circumstances may be questioned on the basis of their age, their mental health, their level of intellectual ability or other factors (Warren 2007). Braye (2000) also points to the dilemmas inherent in balancing the protection and the personal autonomy of service users and the potential for conflict between risk management and empowerment and suggests that these complexities may be used as a refuge by professionals seeking to justify their unwillingness to yield decision making power or share this with service users.

However, service user engagement is not merely an idealistic form of rhetoric, but has become, for many areas of welfare provision a form of benchmark of service standards. Moreover, this development is underpinned by a clear legal mandate. The legal framework within which social work operates is dominated by the Children Act 1989 and by the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. These Acts govern much of social work activity with children and families and with adults respectively. Threaded throughout the statutory guidance in relation to each Act are requirements that service users be consulted and involved at all stages of any social work intervention. Critics might argue that, notwithstanding such guidance, the interpretation of this and other relevant legislation all too often reduces service user participation to a relatively tokenistic process involving much rhetoric yet little more than information-sharing in reality. Nonetheless the advent of the Human Rights Act 1998, together with the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003, provides a substantial imperative for

collaborative professional practice whereby service users must be actively consulted as to their needs and wishes and their rights to this upheld.

Inroads into the traditional professional privileges of authority and autonomy have also been made from a different source. As well as the bottom-up pressure for greater transparency and accountability of professional practice in the interest of enhanced service user participation, a top-down influence has been exerted during the 1980s and 1990s by successive governments. The managerialist emphasis within social work discussed in the previous section has pervaded health and social care. The intention of this, once again, has been to rein in the professional power base though with the rather different aim of promoting greater economic rationality and improved market discipline. Despite fundamental differences in their provenance, the common outcome of these challenges from across the political spectrum has been one of diminished professional control over and independence from external forms of influence.

In summarising the shift in perspective on and attitude towards the professions that has taken place over the last three decades, the concept of reflexivity, developed by Giddens (2001), is useful. Reflexivity refers to the way in which people make sense of the rapidly changing and increasingly complex social world in which they live. Giddens suggests that it is the reflexive use of knowledge by people - in order to review and develop their understanding of and standpoint in relation to all kinds of social phenomena - that explains changing attitudes. In the case of the professions, greater awareness by the general public of the implications of the social closure, elitism and paternalism that characterised traditional forms of professionalisation has been used reflexively to engender a sense of mistrust and of limited confidence. Similarly, increased public knowledge of professional practice deficits or of malpractice has led to heightened popular scepticism as to 'professional' credibility. The cumulative effect or weight of such critical reflexive analysis has created conditions of profound uncertainty for contemporary professionals. The notion of 'professionalism' remains relatively clearly understood as referring to particular forms of responsible conduct such as, for instance, an appropriate public demeanour. However, the question of how 'professional'

practitioners should operate in terms of their use of knowledge, engagement with service users and others and so on, has been opened up for debate. This is summarised by Davies (2000: 287) as follows:

> 'Traditional hierarchies are crumbling, old notions of professional identity are under assault and professional support structures are no longer what they were ... All of these challenges to professional identity have forced professionals to examine who and what they are and to question what they could be in the future.'

As has been shown then many welfare-orientated occupational groups have reason to be beset by doubt as to their professional standing and direction, with social work as no exception.

Models of Professional Identity

The question of what constitutes a relevant contemporary professional identity has been responded to in different ways. One model for understanding and defining contemporary professional practice that is of immediate relevance to social work, and to social work education, distinguishes between the *technical rational* and the *professional artistry* forms of professional identity (or ways of being). The idea of these alternative characterisations originated with the work of Schon (1983, 1987) and has been built upon by Fish (1995) and Fish and Coles (2000) who summarise the different approaches to professional practice in the following table:

The technical rational (TR) view	The professional artistry (PA) view
• Follows rules, laws, routines and prescriptions	• Starts where rules fade, sees patterns, frameworks
• Uses diagnosis, analysis	• Uses interpretation/appreciation
• Wants efficient systems	• Wants creativity and room to be wrong
• Sees knowledge as graspable, permanent	• Knowledge is temporary, dynamic, problematic
• Theory is applied to practice	• Theory emerges from practice;
• Visible performance is central	• There is more to it than surface features
• Setting out and testing for basic competency is vital	• There is more to it than the sum of the parts
• Technical expertise is all	• Professional judgement counts
• Sees professional activities as masterable	• Sees mystery at the heart of professional activities
• Emphasises the known	• Embraces uncertainty
• Standards must be fixed. Standards are measurable and must be controlled	• That which is most easily fixed and measurable is also often trivial – professionals should be trusted
• Emphasises assessment, IPR, inspection, accreditation	• Emphasises investigation, reflection, deliberation
• Change must be managed from outside	• Professionals can develop from inside
• Quality is really about the quantity of that which is easily measurable	• Quality comes from deepening insight into one's values, priorities, actions
• Technical accountability	• Professionals' answerability
• This is training	• This is education
• It takes the instrumental view	• It sees education as intrinsically worthwhile
	Fish and Coles (2000: 298)

On the basis of this analysis, Fish and Coles (2000: 290) describe professional care practitioners as being 'tormented by two incompatible views of professionalism.' The implications of their tabular summary are clear: the mandate for, and ability to engage in, reflective learning and practice by practitioners is proposed as essentially at odds with the bureaucratic requirements upon practitioners emerging from quality management initiatives. For the practitioner who identifies with a more technical rational approach,

efficiency is all to the extent that this becomes synonymous with professionalism. This approach holds that professional practice is not necessarily particularly complex but can be routinised through the development of a range of systems designed to respond to different needs and circumstances. The skills required to operate the systems can be learned and applied on the basis of practice guidelines. For those adhering to a view of professional practice as artistry, however, this is a gross, even a damaging, over-simplification of professionalism because it fails to acknowledge or to provide for the essential uncertainty and unpredictability of professional practice. Real life, particularly those aspects which relate directly to issues of human need and welfare, is seen as involving inevitable confusion, contradiction and loose ends and thus as not being amenable to neat categorisation in terms of prescribed systems and procedures. The role of the professional as artist is to respond creatively to the often messy, always complex, business of life, to improvise, to review and to try out different strategies. Hence two very different forms of professional identity emerge.

Fundamental differences between the two perspectives are also evident in their views regarding the development and use of a professional knowledge base. For the technical rational, knowledge is something to be learned and applied. Whilst the knowledge base should be revised and updated in accordance with, for instance, emerging research findings, a wholly deductive approach is taken to the use of knowledge for practice purposes. Professional artistry proponents, on the other hand, see themselves as constantly learning in response to situations that cannot be pre-determined or prepared for on a routine basis. Thus the professional artistry perspective adopts a more inductive approach since it advocates not only openness to research developments but also to the constant refining and extension of knowledge through critical reflection upon practice experience. The different views as to quality that are held by these alternative perspectives flow very much from what has gone before. Rather than seeking to assess and emphasise visible performance in the manner of the technical rational approach, the professional artistry approach holds that quality assurance of professional standards must derive from the facility for insight into own practice, and to self, and a readiness to be answerable for this by the practitioner.

The typology put forward by Fish and Coles (2000) lays out a framework for conceptualising different forms of professional identity. The construction of such starkly oppositional positions is helpful in this regard. Certainly in relation to, social work, the positions can be seen as typifying alternative approaches to practice since the technical rational perspective is immediately relevant to the role of care manager whilst the professional artistry position more closely resembles more therapeutic social work engagements. However, the framework can be critiqued in a number of ways. For example, an argument can be made that the technical rational identity is not in fact relevant to a discussion of professionalism since the characteristics associated with it are not those of a professional. This is a position taken by Southon and Braithwaite (2000) who contend that a task-orientated analysis reveals that professionalism is essentially defined through evidence of a combination of high levels of both uncertainty and complexity in any professional task. Where either of these is present then the task may be prepared for on a relatively routinised or technical, albeit a skilled, basis. Where the two coalesce, however, such a technical response is insufficient and thus rendered invalid.

Following this line of argument, Southon and Braithwaite (2000) would see the technical rational emphasis on preparedness for all eventualities as indicative of a non-professional task-orientation. The notion of 'mystery at the heart of professional activities' (a characteristic of the professional artistry approach) is also problematic because it echoes the idea of mystique and opaqueness as key contributors to the ability of the traditional professional to withhold knowledge from service users and others and, in so doing, to develop and maintain an imbalance of power between themselves and others. If it is accepted that a growing intolerance of such power imbalances has been instrumental in a rejection of traditional professionalism, which has in turn given rise to a quest for new forms of professional identity, then it is hardly logical to suppose that such 'mystery' is acceptable as a key characteristic of one such new identity.

Linked to this criticism is a further concern: the lack of an explicit value base for either the technical rational or the professional artistry forms of identity. Whilst an implicit set

of values is discernible in epistemological terms of, for instance, the respective emphases upon deductive and inductive approaches to the use of knowledge, there is no clear sense of how either these identities conceptualises questions relating to difference, discrimination and disadvantage. Instead, a kind of assumed neutrality as to these sorts of issues pervades each perspective.

The absence of any explicit reference to difference within the Fish and Coles (2002) typology is significant because of the inevitable range of differences between practitioner and service user, the potential for these to impact upon the working engagement and the need for some effective form of response to and management of these. Also, however, the apparent neutrality of the typology appears to deny the existence of difference between practitioners i.e. within the professional grouping. Traditional professionalism reflected the access to higher education enjoyed predominantly by white, middle class men - now a very out-dated state of affairs. Notwithstanding the continued under-representation of women and ethnic minorities, many areas of professional life have become more feminized and their profile is also changing in terms of class and ethnicity. Moreover, reforms in, for example medical and social work education mean that practitioners may qualify at younger ages than previously (Perry and Cree 2003, Lyons and Manion 2004). Davies (2000:351) summarises these developments when she points out that the typical professional can no longer be described as 'with a white face, a bewhiskered jaw and greying temples, eyes peering down at you over half-glasses.'

Gender – or rather the gendered nature of professionalism – has been argued by a number of writers (e.g. Hearn 1982, Pateman 1988)) to be of particular significance to any discussion of contemporary professional identity because of the historical grounding of professionalism in patriarchal social arrangements and relations. Witz (1992) builds on this through the contention that gender difference is fundamental to theorising new forms of professional identity because male and female enactments of the professional role have been and are distinct and thus need to be considered in terms of equally distinct analytic frameworks. This is a theme pursued by Davies (2000) who supports the view that the behaviours and thus the identity traditionally associated with the masculine gender have

been central to earlier conceptualisations of professionalism. In other words, that traditional professionalism can be understood as having been shaped by gender. Furthermore, Davies (2000: 348-350)) highlights six key behavioural characteristics of what she terms 'the gendered professional ideal' and contrasts these with what she sees as more feminine-orientated styles of professional practice. These may be summarised as follows:

Masculine-orientation to Professionalism	Feminine-orientation to Professionalism
• Mastery of knowledge • Unilateral decision process • Autonomy and self-management • Individual accountability • Detachment • Interchangeability of practitioners	• Reflectively using experience and experience • Creating an active community in which a solution can be negotiated • Recognizing interdependence with others • Collectively accountable for practice • Engaged and committed stance towards client • Accepts use of self as part of therapeutic encounter Davies (2000)

Davies (2000) notes that historically the notion of professionalism has celebrated a particular model of masculinity – that of the lone hero who, self-reliant and imbued with 'expert' knowledge and status, sweeps commandingly in and out of fleeting encounters with service users exercising decisive judgement and cool detachment. Further, that relations with service users and colleagues are characterised by dependence and deference respectively. For Davies (2000) an alternative model of professional identity is available, however, through detailed examination of those elements of areas of care work that have traditionally been seen as structurally subordinate or adjunct to 'real' professionalism. These aspects of practice are presented as embodying a way of behaving and therein a professional identity that is centrally orientated around reflectiveness, interdependence with others (service users and colleagues), consistent engagement with

service users and the explicit use of self as part of the intervention. At the heart of Davies' (2000) conceptualisation of feminine-orientated professionalism is the notion of 'reflective solidarity'. This derives from the work of Dean (1997) who proposed that group solidarity can actually embrace and be energized and sustained by difference (as opposed to sameness). This line of thinking underpins the suggestion by Davies (2000) that the 'unilateral decision making' of the masculine professional orientation (or traditional professionalism) can be revisioned as negotiated solving or resolution. Davies suggests that an 'active community' of service user(s) and professionals – perhaps from a range of disciplines – can be developed through open communication and recognition and acceptance of the varying forms of knowledge that each may contribute as of equal value. In short, all become experts in relation to their own perspectives and group power relations reflect this.

In this way, Davies (2000) presents a model of professional identity that is defined in large part by the facility to work collaboratively and in an egalitarian fashion that avoids the exercise of power and control by any one player over another. This model is certainly helpful in considering how the participation of service users can be enhanced both by themselves and by the professionals with whom they engage. The model does not explore, however, the efficacy of such mutuality of responsibility for problem-solving in situations where some form of control over service users may be necessary. Taking account – even encouraging the expression – of the perceptions of a service user who is experiencing delusion due to mental health problems, for example, is not necessarily the same thing as actively using the service user contribution to frame the intervention. Nor does Davies' model distinguish between professionals with differing responsibilities. Perhaps this is because she does not see this as relevant. However, in social work as in many other caring professions, direct practitioners have quite different roles and responsibilities from those who not only manage but also direct their activities. A critique of Davies' formulation could therefore be that whilst it is a useful analytic tool for direct practitioners, it is less helpful in illuminating organisational practice.

There are parallels between Fish and Coles' professional artistry category of professional identity and Davies' notion of a feminine professional orientation. For example, both emphasise reflective practice and, through this, an inductive approach to theorising or making sense of practice situations. Similarly, the technical rational and masculine-orientated identities share a more deductive approach to the use of knowledge. These models demonstrate vividly the ambiguity within social work as to whether it can, or should, claim the standing of a profession. Historically, social work commentators such as Loch (1906) may well have aspired to the traditional masculine-orientated mode of professionalism by which medicine and other established professions were characterised. This came to be challenged, however, by the radical social work movement of the 1960s and 1970s that espoused solidarity with service users in a manner akin to the notion of solidarity embedded within the feminine-orientated conceptualisation. The more recent debates surrounding the relevance of managerialist approaches for social work are succinctly captured by the technical rational versus professional artistry schema as discussed above.

What each of these typologies of what it may mean to lay claim to the label of 'professional' do quite clearly, however, is to highlight the connections between the competence-based model of learning and development and traditional and masculine-orientated approaches to professionalism. Similarly, reflective learning may be seen as directly leading to and arising from the professional artistry and feminine-orientated approaches. In terms of social work specifically, these positions are both confirmed and elaborated by Clark (1995). Clark distinguishes between professional competence and professional discipline in social work. By competence, Clark (1999:569-70) means 'the behaviours deemed appropriate to various professional tasks to be explicitly identified and directly tested.' By discipline, he means two things: 'mastery', which he defines as an informed understanding and grasp of a relevant knowledge base, and 'creativity' which he explains in terms of ingenuity, imagination and 'departure from precept and precedent' (1995:576-77). Like Fish and Coles and Davies, Clark presents a typology of alternative conceptualisations of professionalism, and with specific reference to social work:

Competence	Discipline
• Predefined problems based on conservative definitions • Known job tasks • Routine, mechanical problem-solving • Performance centred • Pre-packaged knowledge • Stereotyped methods, external prescriptions • Predictable outcomes • Knowledge types: methods and procedures • Preparation: technical training	• Unfamiliar problems, unknown instances • Unpredictable tasks • Problematization, reflective thinking • Person centred • Seeking new knowledge • Novel methods, innovative solutions • Unforeseen outcomes • Knowledge types: social and cultural awareness, theoretical understanding • Preparation: professional education

adapted from Clark (1995)

For Clark, and for many others writing about contemporary social work education (Jones and Joss 1995, Yelloly 1995, Dominelli 1996, Lester 1999, Cooper 2008), competence-based and driven forms of learning and practitioner identity are unhelpfully narrow and are insufficient alone for effective social work development (at pre or post qualifying levels) or, certainly, for any credible claim by social work to professionalism. As seen in Chapter Two (see: The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches), however, there are clear and undeniable benefits of the competence-based approach which are not to be lightly dismissed. Thus a composite social work identity that draws, in a balanced manner, upon the technical rational, masculine-orientated, competence-based characteristics yet, equally, is informed by professional artistry, feminine-orientated and reflective learning characteristics may represent a professional ideal for social work. In order for this to be achieved, however, social work education needs to be typified by equally composite and balanced use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches and the relationship between these emerges as a key consideration. As Ford *et al* (2005: 397)) point out, the 'nascent

professional identity' of newly qualified practitioners, emerging from social work programmes, is contingent upon the nature of their education and training.

Summary

This chapter has explored the manner in which social work in the UK has developed throughout the last century in terms of professionalisation. Some of the ways in which what constitutes professionalism has become re-evaluated over time have also been considered. Models of contemporary professional identities have been examined and the ways in which the alternative characteristics within these are immediately informed by - and potentially reinforced by - the competence-based and reflective learning approaches have been discussed. Against this backcloth, the central research question as to the relationship between these approaches within social work education is thrown into sharp relief. Whether the DipSW, as a recent vehicle for qualifying social work preparation, has embodied teaching, learning and assessment that is informed by each approach; whether, where and how students have been facilitated in, and required to demonstrate, dual development; and the perceptions of educators and learners as to the relations between these approaches and different forms of professional identity are each areas of enquiry that this research has set out to explore.

Chapter Four: Research Design, Methods and Process

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the process of planning, design and implementation used within this research enquiry. As such, it is useful to re-state the central areas of enquiry. The main research question asks how, and to what extent, DipSW programmes are informed throughout by the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. This overarching question is to be pursued through reference to a number of areas: how the respective approaches are understood; how their use - both single and joint - is perceived within both the agency-based and university-based spheres of DipSW programmes; and the ways in which the approaches are associated with conceptualisations of professionalism and professional identity within social work. What now follows is discussion and explanation of the research design in terms of its theoretical framework and strategy; the data collection methods used, the approach taken to sampling, access and ethical considerations, the place of researcher identity within the research and, finally, the manner in which the data have been analysed and are presented. In this way an account of the overall research process is offered.

Research Design

Writing of research design, de Vaus (2001:9) emphasises that this is not to be confused with particular methods of data collection nor, even, a plan of work for the research but, rather, is the 'logical structure of the inquiry'. de Vaus draws upon the analogy of constructing a building and asserts that, until the type of building that is required (and will best suit the projected purpose) has been settled upon, the detail of, for example, the building materials cannot viably be considered. Similarly then, the design of a piece of research needs to consider a range of matters in order to – and prior to – establishing the specific methods to be deployed.

In terms of the essential components – or building blocks – of research design, Bryman (2004:4) suggests that the issues of the theory-research relationship and of epistemology and ontology form the foundations of any research design. For Bryman, 'methods are not simply neutral tools: they are linked with the ways in which social scientists envision the connection between different viewpoints about the nature of social reality and how it should be examined'. Such 'different viewpoints' refer to the various theoretical, epistemological and ontological positions that may be adopted and used to inform an overall research strategy.

- The theory-research relationship:

The relationship between theory and proposed research may be addressed by asking what is the theoretical framework that informs the research? Silverman (2000:86) maintains that theory can never be considered 'an optional extra in a research study' and, further, that theory and research are inextricably linked to the extent that 'Without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, theory is mere armchair contemplation'.

In an attempt to clarify what precisely is meant by theory within a research context, Merton (1967) distinguished between 'grand theories' which are highly abstract ideas that may not appear readily or immediately applicable to the research focus, or indeed to day to day social life, and 'middle range theories'. Middle range theorising is that which has been developed within or in relation to particular areas or dimensions of social life or, in Bryman's (2004:9) terms, those ideas that 'represent attempts to understand and explain a limited aspect of social life'. Basically then, theory in a research context is about making sense of the particular phenomenon being investigated.

Merton's (1967) distinction is helpful in highlighting the difficulty for researchers in relating and applying grand theory to their inquiries and, also, in identifying a perhaps more immediately practicable realm of middle range theory. This research study is informed predominantly by middle range theorising in terms of ideas relating to teaching, learning and assessment within DipSW qualifying social work programmes. Such

differentiation between grand and middle range theoretical ideas may not always be absolute or clear-cut however, and what may then occur within a research design is that grand and middle range theories may not always be readily distinguishable and may be simultaneously deployed. For example, as demonstrated in the preceding chapter (see Chapter Three - 'The transformation of professionalism'), Giddens' theory of reflexivity – an abstraction in Merton's terms – could usefully be drawn upon in seeking to understand the development of the professions, the debate as to the professional status of social work and questions of professional identity. This illustrates the mutually informative and simultaneously useful nature of abstract and applied theorising and the way in which each may be drawn upon within a single research design.

Bryman (2004) proposes that as well as framing the research so as to promote conceptual understanding and explanation, the use of theory may be approached on either – or both – an inductive or a deductive basis. Gilbert (2008:27) summarises these different approaches as follows; 'induction is the technique for generating theories and deduction is the technique for applying them'. By this he means that whilst deductive use of theory is centrally concerned with the testing of a hypothesis, induction is primarily about theory building through inferring from a set of observations. So, deduction involves the application of theory, through the development of a hypothesis, to the collection and analysis of data in order that the original theoretical reasoning may be confirmed or revised. Induction, on the other hand, inverts this process and seeks to build or expand upon existing theorising as to a particular phenomenon by analysing the implications of the research findings. Bryman (2004:9) explains this process as 'drawing generalisable inferences out of observations' and notes that, in this way, a given body of theoretical knowledge is added to and extended.

To illustrate with reference to this research exercise: the notion that the competence-based and reflection learning approaches are in some way antithetical and thus inherently contradictory could form a hypothesis deduced from the literature that outlines the conceptual foundations of each approach. Empirical data as to respondent perceptions of this proposal may be collected and tested against the hypothesis in order to confirm or

deny this. Instead of – or as well as – a primarily deductive use of theory, however, inductive theorising may take place in relation to how the competence-based and reflective learning approaches are understood by respondents in order to build new and perhaps different theoretical understandings of these.

Gilbert (2008), Bryman (2004) and others such as Silverman (2006) point out, however, that it is misleading and an over-simplification to regard inductive and deductive approaches to theory as entirely polar and oppositional alternatives. Rather, each needs to be understood as a tendency and it is likely that a research strategy will embody elements of both – though perhaps with a primary emphasis upon one in particular. Gilbert (2008:27) points out that, whilst it is true that inductive and deductive treatments of theory are each characterised by distinct features:

> 'In the course of doing research they often get intertwined. First, one has an idea for a theory, perhaps by contemplating the common features of a set of cases and inducing a theory. Then one checks it out against some data, using deduction. If the theory doesn't quite fit the facts, induction is used to construct a slightly more complicated, but better theory. And so on'.

This is confirmed by de Vaus (2001:8) who notes that 'although theory testing and theory building are often presented as alternative modes of research they should be part of one ongoing process'.

Such intertwining in the course of the research process is clearly illustrated within the design of this research. The hypothetical notion, derived from existing literature and research, that DipSW programmes may be dominated by use of a competence-based approach to teaching, learning and assessment is to be pursued through exploration of particular social work qualifying programmes. Thus deductive use of theory is deployed in terms of an investigation of the presence and extent of use of the competence-based approach. However, an inductive theoretical tendency is also demonstrated through the process of data analysis and ensuing discussion which seeks to infer possible alternative understandings of and influences upon the relationship between competence-based and reflective learning within the DipSW programmes studied.

Epistemological considerations:

In general terms, though the following relationships should not be over-stated, a deductive approach to theoretical reasoning can be deemed more closely allied to a positivist research tradition in that links can be seen between hypothesis testing and methods of data collection that are influenced by a natural science model which takes the view that phenomena can be objectively studied, measured and quantified in the manner of a natural science experiment. Following from this, induction may be seen to be inter-connected with interpretivist research strategies that expressly seek to explore people's social reality and their associated perceptions and meanings and that are more exploratory and possibly less structured than methods rooted in the positivist tradition.

This raises the need for clarity as to epistemological considerations or issues; another of Bryman's (2004) foundation stones of research design. Bryman (1998:104) defines an epistemological issue as 'a matter which has to do with the question of what is to pass as warrantable, and hence acceptable, knowledge'. Similarly, Walliman (2006: 15) explains that 'Epistemology is concerned with how we know things and what we can regard as acceptable knowledge in a discipline.' What is being highlighted then is that different philosophical positions exist as to how the social world can be investigated and thus that all research studies are necessarily informed by such stances. In the shortest terms then, epistemology refers to the principles that inform the generation or development of knowledge and thus the manner in which social reality is viewed is key to determining not only whether knowledge may be regarded as legitimate but how such knowledge is most appropriately sought. This is confirmed by D'Cruz and Jones (2004: 57 who note that:

> 'The selection of design, methodology, data generation and analysis does not consist of random or ad hoc decisions (or neutral methods or techniques) but in assumptions about reality (ontology) and how this may be known or understood (epistemology)'

Interpretivism represents an alternative and very different epistemological position to that of positivism. Essentially an interpretivist approach is concerned to explore and

understand the perceptions and meanings that people attach to their experience of the social world. Bryman (2004:13) defines interpretivism as follows:

> 'It is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required which respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action'.

Ontological considerations are cited by a number of writers (May 1997, Silverman 2000, Bryman 2004) as a further major component of research design. Ontological questions relate to the extent of independence or interdependence believed to exist between people and social entities or phenomena. The ontological position of objectivism holds that social phenomena are external to – and thus have an objective reality and identity from – the people engaging with them. Constructionism, however, represents an alternative view that social phenomena and the meanings attributed to these are socially constructed on a continual and ongoing basis rather than fixed and independent realities. This is described by Schutz (1962: 5) in the following terms:

> 'Strictly speaking there are no such things as facts pure and simple. All facts are from the outset selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. There are, therefore, always interpreted facts; either facts looked at as detached from their context by an artificial abstraction or facts considered within their particular setting.'

This is not to say, of course, that the notion of external reality is denied absolutely but, rather, that it is viewed as accessible only, or primarily, through the perceptions and understandings attached to it (Flick, von Kardorffe and Steinke 2004).

It is important neither to over-simplify nor over-state the differences between the respective epistemological traditions of positivism and interpretivism since the extent to which they diverge in the sense of leading to and encompassing different schools of research methods is a matter of some debate. Nonetheless, a clear association exists between the epistemological approach of positivism and the ontological position of objectivism on the one hand and those of interpretivism and constructionism on the other. Herein lies the central rationale for the theoretical premises upon which this research is

based and which inform its design. This research is concerned to explore the understandings, use and implications of two approaches to teaching and learning within the context of social work education and the form, if any, of relationship between the two which is recognised and constructed. The research is therefore concerned with perception and a central premise is that meaning is not a universal and objective entity that may be measured in these terms. This has already been demonstrated, for instance, in Chapter Two where a range of understandings and meanings that have been attributed to each of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches have been outlined. In view of this, the application of a research approach founded on positivist principles of objectivism and designed and conducted in accordance with practices associated with the natural sciences has been seen as unlikely to capture the essence of perceived experience of the particular phenomena under study and therefore as unsuitable. Instead, the theoretical framework of this research is predicated, in ontological terms on constructionism which is congruent with the epistemological position of interpretivism.

- Research strategy- the Case Study approach:

An overview of the chosen research strategy and its relevance to the research focus will now be discussed. The strategy selected is the case study approach. Rather than representing a method of research, the case study is generally recognised as a strategic approach to research (Yin 2003, Denscombe 2003, Flyvbjerg 2004). As a major proponent of this research approach, Yin (2003:13) maintains that 'the case study is not either a data collection tactic or merely a design feature alone but a comprehensive research strategy'. Moreover, the case study approach 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context' (Yin 2003:13). Since it is the intention of this research enquiry to examine the ways in which DipSW programmes are informed by competence-based and reflective approaches to learning through reference to the design and delivery of these programmes, the case study strategy with its emphasis upon contextual backcloth, is perceived as an appropriate research approach. Yin (2003:6) identifies the prime conditions for use of the case study as being those where the research question is concerned with the how and the why of a phenomenon (as opposed to a

primary interest in the what, the where, how much or how many). In this sense then a cross-sectional approach is less relevant. Also, as where the researcher has little or no control over behavioural events (that is to say, has limited or no opportunity to manipulate events or behaviours by, for instance, subjecting them to experiments) and where the focus is upon the contemporary rather than the historical. Clearly then the exploration of existing social work courses in order to study how these make use of particular approaches to learning meets Yin's criteria for use of the case study strategy. In short, case study design provides a means of exploration of a research focus which, in this instance, is compatible with neither experimental, cross-sectional nor longitudinal forms of design.

A further aspect of the rationale for the adoption of case study research design is the potential fluidity with regard data collection methods that it offers. Although the methods selected are discussed in more detail below, here the point may be made that an appealing aspect of the case study is that within it, a data collection method that proves ineffective may be substituted by another more promising method yet with no disruption of the overall research design. For instance, had my plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with students (see below) foundered due to a lack of willing individual respondents, then a focus group wherein students might have felt greater confidence as a collective might easily have been used instead. Finally, it is important to note also my sense of affinity with the case study as a research approach since it resonates strongly with my social work experience; social workers assess and intervene in circumstances on the basis of specific information set against and in the light of the overall situation and, in this way, clear parallels between social work practice and the research approach may be seen.

In essence the case study frames the detailed and intense scrutiny of a particular instance – or sample of instances – of the phenomenon being studied whilst also recognising and exploring the significance of its context. A 'case may be an organisation, an event or even an individual; what matters is that 'the 'case' is the focus of interest in its own right' (Bryman 2004:49). Stake (1998) warns, however, that establishing the boundaries of the case; that is, where the specifics of the instance end and associated generalities (that go

beyond case context) begin may be problematic and thus attention to defining the case parameters is critically important. This can be illustrated through reference to this research enquiry into social work education. Social work programmes derive from a partnership between higher education institutions and social work agencies. Thus agency employers form an important aspect of any enquiry. This raises the question of how far the research should extend into the field of social work employment and the point at which this begins to fall outside case the context or parameters. A strategic decision is required, therefore, in terms of defining case boundaries. In this instance the employment aspect of each case will be explored through – and confined to – investigation of the collaboration between universities and partner employer agencies in the provision of DipSW programmes since to go beyond this would be to blur case parameters to a potentially unmanageable extent.

Denscombe (2003) identifies a number of characteristics as typifying the case study. As stated, it involves the detailed exploration – in the manner of a spotlight – of particular instances rather than a more wide-ranging approach. Or, in Denscombe's (2003: 30) terms 'The aim is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular'. Following from this the case study is necessarily an in-depth consideration of the focus of study. A further central characteristic of the case study is its interest in and attention to the processes and relationships that are enshrined and interplay within a given case. Denscombe (2003:31) notes that, in view of this focus upon means as well as ends 'The real value of a case study is that it offers the opportunity to explain *why* certain outcomes might happen - more than just find out what those outcomes are'. What this means is that this research, in using the case study strategy, can reasonably hope to ascertain whether a particular emphasis upon either competence-based or reflective learning within a DipSW programme occurs, for example, on the basis of explicit design or of chance.

This emphasis upon process, together with the fact that a case is that which is already in existence and is being examined in terms of the natural context or setting in which it arises, leads some writers (Robson 1993, Denscombe 2003) to define the case study as a holistic approach. In other words that the case study necessarily embraces and

encompasses all aspects of its focus of attention and studies this in its entirety. Yin (2003:41) refines this definition by pointing out that whilst a case study may take a holistic approach in some instances, in others it may take the form of what he terms an 'embedded' case study. Here, Yin is making the point that specific aspects – or sub-units of analysis – that are 'embedded' within the case may be focused upon. Yin (2003:41-2) illustrates this differentiation between holistic and embedded case studies as follows:

> 'In an organizational study, the embedded units might be ...meetings, roles or locations ... the resulting design would be called an *embedded case study design.* In contrast, if the case study examined only the global nature of a program or an organisation, a *holistic case design* would have been used.'

This seems to imply the taking of an either/or approach. In the case of this research which will seek to understand the use of the respective approaches to learning through reference to, for example, the operation of the practice learning component of social work education courses or perceptions of university-based assessments (embedded case study design) but also to understand the programmes on a more holistic basis, this is problematic. de Vaus (2001) resolves the holistic versus embedded design dilemma, however, by clarifying that in fact the holistic level of analysis depends upon and derives from scrutiny of certain embedded component parts. de Vaus (2001:221) summarises that:

> 'A well-designed case study will avoid examining just some of the constituent elements. It will build up a picture of the case by taking into account information gained from many levels. The final case study will tell us more than, and something qualitatively different from, that which any constituent element of the case could tell us'.

Thus de Vaus points to a coherent relationship between the embedded and holistic levels of analysis and it is this that underpins the chosen direction of this research.

By now it will have become apparent that the design of case study research involves a number of distinctive considerations that must be weighed carefully. Whilst this is true,

of course, of any research venture, the significance in relation to case studies is heightened and is outlined by Yin (2003:18) as follows;

> 'The development of this research design is a difficult part of doing case studies. Unlike other research strategies, a comprehensive 'catalog' of research designs for case studies has yet to be developed'.

Writers such as Yin (2003) and de Vaus (2001) have, however, begun to provide more systematic analysis of how case study designs may be developed and the requisite decision-making throughout this process. Certain of the issues relevant to each stage of the development of a case study design will now be discussed in turn and illustrated with reference to the research focus.

In terms of the selection of cases, de Vaus (2001) proposes a typology against which decisions regarding case selection can be mapped in order to ensure that those cases investigated fit coherently within the overall research design. de Vaus distinguishes between descriptive and explanatory case studies and notes the different relationships with theory that these imply. As already discussed, however, the inevitably interwoven nature of theory-testing and theory-building in practice suggests that it is more helpful to think in terms of primary and secondary emphases rather than clear cut polarities. This research into social work education, for example, is of an exploratory nature and thus necessarily draws and depends upon description whilst also embodying an explanatory element.

What is more immediately distinguishable is the difference between – and the different rationales for the use of – single or multiple case design. Yin (2003:44-5) comments that whilst 'the single-case design is eminently justifiable under certain conditions...the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust'. It is such robustness that this research has striven for and hence the decision to investigate multiple (three) cases of DipSW programmes. This said, it is particularly important to treat each individual case within a

multiple-case design as a single case study in its own right in order that subsequent comparison between cases can be made.

Few would question the internal validity of the case study approach. As de Vaus (2001:236) observes 'Case study designs are devised to yield a sensible, plausible account of events and in this way achieve internal validity'. Concern as to external validity is frequently expressed, however (Yin 2003, Mason 2002, Flyvbjerg 2004, Stake 1998). The basic question asked is: how far is it possible to generalise from the particular to other like phenomena? This issue has been responded to variously. For instance, Bassey (1981:86) advocates the idea of relatability rather than generalisability and maintains that if case studies:

> 'are carried out systematically and critically, if they are aimed at the improvement of education, if they are relatable, and if by publication of the findings they extend the boundaries of existing knowledge, then they are valid forms of educational research'.

From a different perspective, Lincoln and Guba (2000:36) assert that generalisability may arise in two different forms. One may be 'rationalistic, propositional, law-like' and make a claim to universal applicability. Another, equally valid form of generalisability, however, may be more 'naturalistic' and may seek to extend understanding through transferability between different but similar contexts. This is supported by Flyvbjerg (2004) who maintains that it is a misunderstanding both to believe that case studies are too specific to be generalised from or to see more formalistic or 'rationalistic' forms of generalisability as the only forms of any value. For Flyvbjerg (2004: 395), 'the force of example' should not be underestimated by which he means that if a research outcome emerges from context A, then its possible relevance for context B (as long as there is congruence between these contexts) should not be dismissed but, rather, considered seriously as a form of generalisability.

Methods

The research methods associated with an interpretivist approach are invariably qualitative in nature since they are aimed at discovering and presenting the world from the standpoint of the research respondent or participant. Such methods seek to collect data that represents knowledge in the form of in-depth understanding of meaning. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that researchers using such methods must accept that it is not possible for them to stand apart from and achieve an entirely objective position in relation to the social world they are studying (Miller and Glasner 2004, Roberts 2007). Indeed, Denscombe (2003:300) comments that:

> 'Inevitably, the sense we make of the social world and the meaning we give to events and situations are shaped by our experience as social beings and the legacy of the values, norms and concepts we have assimilated during our lifetime'.

Hence reflexivity in relation to the research – the process wherein the researcher reflects explicitly upon and acknowledges the significance of values and bias for their interpretations and conclusions – is a crucial element of interpretivist methods. This is discussed further below in terms of researcher identity.

Many commentators on the case study approach (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster 2000, de Vaus 2001, Yin 2003) highlight the range and multiplicity of sources of evidence and hence of methods of data collection that the case study strategy may involve and indeed encourages. Yin (2003) identifies six key – or more common – sources of evidence that may be drawn upon within a case study: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts. For Yin, this is an illustrative rather than an exhaustive list. His point is that a case study may derive from a wide range and variety of sources of evidence. This needs to be set against the cautionary advice that is frequently offered (particularly to beginning researchers) to the effect that it is important not to become over-ambitious in attempting simultaneous, or even sequential, deployment of too wide or complex a repertoire of data collection methods lest this result in the researcher becoming overwhelmed, respondents becoming

bewildered and data emerging in the form of a chaotic deluge (Bell 1999, Edwards and Talbot 1999). Within this research, this advice has been heeded and the decision taken to distinguish between sources of evidence that may furnish valuable background information, the better to understand the case study context, and research methods aimed at gathering data for analysis. For each of the three case studies undertaken, therefore, programme documents were collected and read and a single non-participant observation of a student group tutorial meeting was undertaken. However, the purpose of these was not for direct data collection but, rather for familiarisation with and enhanced understanding of each DipSW case study programme. Similarly, key informants were identified at each case study site. Bryman (2004:540) defines a key informant as 'Someone who offers the researcher .... perceptive information about the social setting, important events and individuals.' The discussions held with these informants provided invaluable orientation for each of the case study programmes and certain of their observations are used to introduce each programme (see Chapter Five - 'Introducing the Case Study Programmes'). However, the content of these discussions has not been treated as data for the purpose of analysis. Instead, this has been gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews.

Interviews are an appropriate tool for gathering detailed information (Denscombe 2003) and enable in-depth insight into the research focus (Bryman 2004). The use of individual interviews permits the voice of each respondent to be clearly heard (Arksey and Knight 1999) and avoids the organizational and management problems associated with group interviews and focus groups (Denscombe 2003, Rapley 2004). Many research methods texts (e.g. Bryman 2004, Jupp 2006, Walliman 2006) distinguish between structured (tightly structured and standardized interview formats primarily involving closed questions, almost in the manner of a verbally administered questionnaire) and those perhaps rather misleadingly labeled as unstructured (far more open discussion-based interview format involving wholly open questions, almost in the manner of a focused conversation in which the interviewee takes the lead) interview approaches. The semi-structured interview is located between these as containing elements of each. Flick (2002), however, distinguishes between different versions of the semi-structured

interview approach and defines these according to the extent to which the respondent's biographical history is of interest. Arising from this catalogue is what Meuser and Nagel (1991) and Flick (2002) have classified as the 'Expert Interview'. This is where:

> 'The interviewee is of less interest as a (whole) person than in his or her capacity of being an expert for a certain field of activity. He or she is integrated into the study not as a single case but as representing a group of specific experts' (Flick 2002: 89).

Since the aim of this research into social work education is to seek the perceptions of those immediately involved with and informed as to this, it is the expert interview form that has been selected as an appropriate method. Within the case study research strategy, three groups of 'expert' interview respondents were identified: DipSW students, agency-based practice teachers and programme personnel (this refers to both university-based DipSW tutors and agency-based representatives such as training managers and practice learning coordinators with specific responsibility for liaising with the programmes). In accordance with the advice of Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Fielding and Thomas (2008), an interview guide was developed comprising a series of topics, drawn from the literature, expressed as questions. Each of these main questions was supplemented by at least one probe question aimed at clarifying and prompting. The interview guide used is included as Appendix IV. A further important part of the interview guide development was to gain feedback from certain 'critical friends', that is informed and knowledgeable others with an interest in the research topic. Two such people were invited to review the interview guide, having been shown an outline of the research, in order that their comments could inform the final version. As Roberts (2007: 104) notes:

> 'the intention to research on a particular topic and in a certain way may be relayed to others in various ways possibly to gain responses which may help frame the intended research further.'

Notwithstanding their inherent advantages, there are, of course, potential problems with undertaking individual semi-structured interviews. Some of these relate specifically to expert interviews. For example, Meuser and Nagel (1991) highlight that a respondent

who has been envisaged as an expert in relation to the topic under study may turn out not to be so at all or may choose to respond in terms of personal history and experience (not all of which may be relevant) rather than expert knowledge. At the other extreme, an expert respondent may present their knowledge in the form of a lecture (what Flick 2002:90 terms the 'rhetoric interview') which may or may not satisfactorily address the researcher's immediate areas of interest. In terms of semi-structured interviews more widely there is always the challenge of 'steering' the interview encounter to ensure that required topics are covered yet this is balanced with space and scope for the interviewee to diverge and digress if this enables them to make their own sense of interview topics and to present their own perceptions as fully as possible. This is in part why the piloting of research instruments is fundamentally important.

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996: 121) refer to piloting as 'reassessment without tears'. They, along with numerous other research design and methods commentators, urge the researcher to try out and test their plans and methods for data collection before embarking on the actual exercise. Although some texts (such as Bryman 2004) appear to consider piloting as more relevant to questionnaire construction and other quantitative forms of data collection, rehearsing the approach to and content of qualitative forms such as the semi-structured interview is equally invaluable. Prior to the first case study, a pilot or 'trial run' was undertaken with a local DipSW programme with which I had existing close contact and familiarity (and was thus ineligible to comprise one of the three case studies). Although my knowledge of this programme meant that there was a certain artificiality to treating it as a case study about which nothing was known, it was nonetheless possible to try out a number of aspects of the data collection process: from the first stage of introducing the research to groups of prospective interviewees and asking for volunteer respondents to piloting the interview topic guide. The learning that was derived from this experience was invaluable and has taught me that piloting is a part of the overall research process that may never be 'safely skipped'. Detailed notes of insights derived from this piloting were taken and these were used to inform the actual data collection. For example, suggestions for a slight re-ordering of the interview topic guide and for additional lines of enquiry were received and incorporated within the

interview approach. I also learned that accessing interview respondents involves a subtle blend of enthusiastic invitation and polite but determined persistence which was to stand me in very good stead throughout each of the subsequent case studies.

Sampling and Access

The approach taken by this research to the identification of case study sites has been that of non-probability, purposive sampling. Non-probability in the sense that case selection has been deliberate and targeted rather than random and purposive in the sense that the aim of the research has been that of 'gaining insight and understanding by hearing from representatives from a target population' (Gilbert 2008: 512). However, as Davidson (2006: 196) points out, such a non-random approach may yet strive for and achieve a degree of representativeness or 'coverage' of the research population in question. Denscombe (2003: 15) proposes that any researcher engaged in non-probability and purposive sampling needs to ask: 'Given what I already know about the research topic and about the range of people or events being studied, who or what is likely to provide the best information?' The answer from the perspective of this research is that the DipSW has typically been provided not only as a discrete programme in its own right but also as part of an undergraduate social science degree and, further, as part of a postgraduate masters degree. An example of each of these programmes has therefore been selected to comprise the three case studies undertaken. Although it is acknowledged that the DipSW has also been provided through open and distance learning, often employment-based, programmes, these fall outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, the third case study goes some way to redressing this since it included a significant employment-based element within the student cohort (see Chapter Five).

Having achieved access to the case study sites (see discussion below), a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used to recruit interview respondents within each site. Bryman (2004: 100) notes that within social research these approaches are 'very common and indeed are more prominent than are samples based on probability

sampling.' Convenience sampling, and snowballing deriving from this, has the virtue of ensuring that respondents who are both accessible and available are drawn upon and is thus an expedient approach, particularly for smaller-scale studies such as this. However, as Flick (2002: 64) cautions: 'It is necessary to define criteria for a well-founded limitation of the sampling'. The criteria used within this research have been that student respondents were those in the final year of their DipSW study and thus had completed or were part-way through their second period of agency-based practice learning and that both practice teachers and programme personnel respondents were those with sufficiently lengthy association with their programmes to be able to draw on knowledge derived from experience of the programme over time. Moreover, Yin (2003: 51) advises that: 'Any use of multiple-case study design must follow a replication, not a sampling, logic.' For Yin, such replication may be literal or theoretical; it is the principle of predictability, which enables theoretical generalisation, that is central. In response to this care has been taken, within each case study, to ensure an approximately similar number of interviewees within each respondent group.

In considering the question of access, it is difficult to find a more appropriate summary than that provided by Van Maanen and Kolb (1985: 11) as follows:

> 'Gaining access to most organizations is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of planning, hard work and dumb luck.'

This was certainly the case within this research: planning, persistence and use of previously established contacts (Bryman 2004) yielded access to two relevant case study sites. In the case of the third, however, the access which had been agreed was suddenly withdrawn on the basis that the programme had decided it was too busy to accommodate a researcher. It was only through 'dumb luck' that a substitute site was relatively quickly and easily found. Existing contacts had been exhausted and anxiety was setting in when I telephoned an institution that was unknown to me and happened to get directly through to the DipSW programme director – who happened to have answered the call on her way out of the office for a period of a few weeks but was immediately engaged and willing to

facilitate access since the programme staff group happened to be particularly interested in social work education research.

Ensuring not only that permission has been gained from any senior 'gatekeepers' within the organisational hierarchy but also, wherever possible, recruiting the support of a particular individual within the research setting who can act as a 'sponsor' is a crucially important aspect of securing access to research sites (Bryman 2004, Saunders 2006). The benefits of such sponsorship need, however, to be considered carefully and ease of entry to the research setting to be offset against the risk of the researcher becoming identified primarily with a sponsor's (or gatekeeper's) interests. As Fetterman (1998:34) cautions: 'establishing independence in the field is important to avoid prematurely cutting off other lines of communication.' This was something to be borne in mind within this research as both gatekeepers and sponsors at each case study site tended to be the respective programme directors.

Edwards and Talbot (1999) strongly advise that negotiating access be conceptualised in terms of a checklist, with due regard to ethical considerations throughout. They recommend that researchers prepare a brief information sheet that can be used to request research access from an organisation as well as to advise potential respondents of precisely what is involved in the research so that they may make an informed choice as to whether to participate. This should include: the purpose of the study, the research design and data collection methods, what will be required of respondents, how data will be used and who will see the final report.

This advice framed the access strategy taken within this research exercise. First, the directors or leaders of DipSW programmes as outlined above were contacted by telephone. The research was explained verbally and access was requested. This was followed up by a written explanation and formal request (see Appendix I). In all three cases this led to my attendance at a university-based staff meeting where my research plans were discussed more fully. Through these meetings I was able to secure volunteer tutor interview respondents and a tutorial observation opportunity as well as establish an

access route both to the students and the practice teachers associated with each programme. These meetings also yielded agreement that information sheets would be distributed on my behalf to agency-based programme personnel. At each of the second and third case study sites, I was allocated space within a whole-year group student lecture to outline the research to students and distribute information sheets. It was through these meetings that I secured student respondents. At the first case study site this process was undertaken on my behalf by a tutor. This had seemed a useful strategy, particularly as the case study site was at some geographical distance. It proved, however, to have been a false economy in terms of time and effort as the tutor who had kindly agreed to disseminate my research plan and request for access amongst students failed to collect the contact details of prospective student respondents and this meant that it was necessary subsequently to write individually to each student in the year group in order to secure respondents.

Practice teacher respondents were accessed through a group meeting at the first case study site that I was able to attend to discuss the research and request interviewees. For the second and third case studies, a sample of practice teachers were contacted by a university tutor with specific responsibility for agency-based practice learning and their consent for me to make follow up contact was ascertained. This enabled me to get directly in touch with potential practice teacher respondents to explain the research and negotiate their agreement to participate.

The above necessarily brief synopsis of the steps taken in gaining access does little justice to what was in fact a concerted plan of campaign, carried out over a number of months and in which Van Maanen and Kolb's (1985:11) warning of the need for 'a combination of planning' and 'hard work' featured heavily. Clearly, however, this was not only necessary in order to achieve access but was also extremely important in ensuring that this stage of the research was conducted in an ethically sound manner. The ethical framework of the research is discussed further below.

Ethics

The ethical considerations surrounding empirical research are often discussed primarily in relation to the practicalities of gaining access to research sites and of data collection (Bell,1999, Denscombe 2003). This is demonstrated by Bulmer (2008: 146), for instance, who observes that:

> 'When designing your research project, you need to consider ethical principles such as informed consent, respect for privacy, safeguarding the confidentiality of data, harm to subjects and researchers, and deceit and lying.'

However, ethical considerations may also be seen as spanning a far wider frame of reference than that pertaining most immediately to data collection and in fact to relate to all aspects and phases of a research enquiry; from its initial conception and design to its implementation (Punch 2001). For example, it is an ethical responsibility for any researcher to ensure that the intended research has a consistent internal logic (congruence between the theoretical framework of the design and its strategy and methods, for instance) in order that it be viewed as trustworthy. Allied to this, Graham, Grewal and Lewis (2007) highlight the importance of the research being credibly demonstrated as of potential wider benefit. This research has been undertaken with its wider usefulness to social work education centrally in mind and, hopefully, the discussion thus far has demonstrated congruence and consistency between theoretical principles and strategic decisions.

To return to Bulmer's list of considerations, however, British Sociological Association (2002) ethical guidelines were adhered to. In addition, although it was not anticipated that any of the interview questions would give rise to any form of harm for respondents such as psychological distress, care was taken within each case study site to ensure that each respondent had access to post-interview support from colleagues, peers or more specialised forms such as student services. Prior to any contact with respondents, ethical approval was sought from and granted by the School Ethics Committee. The informed consent of research participants was addressed through the provision of information sheets (see Appendix II) that clearly detailed the research aims, process and implications

for potential respondents. These were discussed verbally as well as provided in written form to enable any questions arising for prospective respondents to be addressed. Though it was tempting to seize on those who expressed interest and to seek to secure their instant agreement to participate, it was important, of course, to allow time (between one and three weeks) for people to consider the information provided before coming to a final, and informed, decision regarding participation. In advance of each interview (and of the key informant discussions and observations), consent forms were issued which emphasised each participant's right to withdraw from the exercise at any point and without explanation (see Appendix III). These also specified participant rights in terms of privacy and confidentiality and included a caveat as to the limits of these. All data was anonymised. Care was taken to ensure that interview tapes did not include respondent names and these were stored securely and separately from interview transcripts. Each site was assigned an alphabetical letter and each respondent a number and these alone were used to distinguish between and identify transcripts. The interview tapes and transcripts remain securely stored and will be destroyed upon the completion of the assessment of the thesis.

A further central ethical consideration for any researcher is their conduct and self awareness in the course of data collection (Rubin and Rubin 1995) and this is now discussed in some detail in relation to researcher identity.

Researcher Identity

The question of researcher identity is an important part of the wider issue of reflexivity. As indicated above, reflexivity refers to the subjective filters through which researchers study, analyse and present particular aspects of the social world (Denscombe 2003). The issue of whom and how the researcher is perceived as being - both by themselves and their respondents - thus becomes a significant dimension of the research process. The adoption, as in this research, of qualitative research design and methods, wherein interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology are to be found as underpinning

theoretical principles, necessitates careful consideration of the question of researcher identity. Qualitative research strategies are also, of course, those that more usually involve direct engagement and interaction between researcher and respondent and, again, scrutiny of and attention towards the sense of self of the researcher and the way in which the researcher is viewed by others thus becomes important.

The method of semi-structured interviewing used for this research has attracted cautionary advice that neither neutrality nor objectivity on the part of the researcher can be wholly achieved (Miller and Glassner 1999). Potter (1997: 149), for example, writes of 'the fiction that the researcher can somehow disappear from the interaction if only they can make themselves passive enough.' Such warnings are not simply about the demeanour or behavioural conduct of the researcher but are also concerned to highlight that the relationship between the researcher and their focus of study will, almost invariably, embody a complex series of connections in terms of past and present knowledge and experience that will combine to form the researcher's sense of self – their identity – in relation to the research focus. This sense of identity will, implicitly or explicitly, be likely to become communicated to the research respondents who, in turn, will formulate their responses with their understanding of the researcher's identity in mind. With regard interviewing, for example, Fielding and Thomas (2008: 133) note that 'A long tradition of methodological research warns of the many effects the interviewer has on the respondent's statements'.

There are a number of ways in which researcher identity impacts upon data collection. One of the more obvious of these is where the research topic is of a sensitive or even a controversial nature. Within this research the possibility is acknowledged of some diffidence on the part of students who may – whilst still engaged with their programmes and thus subject to assessment – have felt cautious of appearing critical. Notwithstanding such possible reticence, the research topic did not seem an especially sensitive area of focus. Clearly, however, the freedom and openness with which respondents express themselves in relation to actually or potentially sensitive topics will be influenced by how

approachable and sympathetic the researcher is seen as being. This is discussed further below.

Linked to perceptions of the approachability of the researcher is a further, and equally significant, dimension of researcher identity: that of shared experience. Another way of expressing this is through reference to 'insider-outsider perspectives'. An 'insider' researcher is someone who, in some way, has experiential familiarity with the research focus. One example of this would be through membership of the group being studied. The 'outsider' researcher by contrast has a more external status, is someone who lacks any significant sense of shared identity or experience and is seen more in the role of stranger to the area of study. The concept of an insider or outsider position in relation to the research being undertaken was first developed with regard observation as a data collection technique and, more specifically, ethnography and participant observation (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994, Lofland and Lofland 1995). This questioning as to the extent of shared identity and experience between researcher and respondents – whether the researcher can be understood as an insider or an outsider of the research focus – can, however, be seen as equally relevant across a range of qualitative methodology including that of interviewing.

Within this research, a sense of shared experience between each of the various respondent groups and me as the researcher has been present in a number of ways. My familiarity with the DipSW as a vehicle of social work education has been openly acknowledged. More than this, I have direct experience of working both as a DipSW tutor within the university base and as a practice teacher to social work students during their agency-based practice learning. Further, I had not only been a student of social work education - albeit several years previously – but whilst undertaking this research was in the role of student. These areas of overlap and commonality with the research respondents gave rise to what Northway (2002:6) describes as a 'need to maintain a high level of critical self-awareness and remain alert to how identity can impact on the research process'. In short, for me to continually remain conscious of and to review use of insider and outsider perspectives and their respective implications for the research task.

Though often discussed as alternative and quite polarised positions, the insider and outsider states are 'not always mutually exclusive categories' (Northway 2002:6). Rather, the possibility exists for duality of perspective wherein the researcher at times is more strongly aware of elements of the insider and at others, of the outsider perspective informing their approach. This interplay between a sense of belonging and of relatively intimate knowledge of the research focus on the one hand and a more distanced and external sense on the other can also make itself felt to respondents causing them to view the researcher as someone sharing elements of their experience yet remaining detached from the immediacy of it. The potential for a synonymous insider-outsider identity is illustrated by Darlington and Scott (2002: 43) in their report of a researcher who, on the basis of her shared racial and cultural experience with that of her respondents, concluded 'they treated me as a friend – a friendly researcher'. Also, by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002: 18) who provide accounts of their experiences as nurse researchers conducting participant observation and conclude that 'the position of nurse researcher as both 'insider' and 'outsider' investigator provides a unique opportunity'. Such duality characterised the sense of researcher identity held in the course of this research. Much was already known and understood by me on the basis of direct experience but much also was yet to be learned; not least how to ensure maintenance of the 'critical self-awareness' advocated by Northway (2002: 6).

Within this research, a useful strategy for promoting and maintaining critical self-appraisal as to the task of balancing, or holding in tension, insider and outsider perspectives and the effect of these upon the research process, has been to review the respective advantages and disadvantages of these. This has enabled continuous assessment of where it is in fact helpful to allow either to influence thinking or approach. Drawing on the work of a number of research methodology commentators, Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) have developed a framework for such assessment by presenting a typology of the advantages and disadvantages of insider-outsider research perspectives. Among the advantages of the insider perspective is the potential for this to enhance acceptance by respondents and ensuing co-operation. Ultimately, an insider perspective

may even enable access to research sites when this might otherwise have been withheld from someone perceived as a 'stranger'. This has been borne out within this research wherein initial access to the DipSW programmes that have served as case study sites and, more specifically, to groups of respondents appears to have been enhanced by a sense on the part both of gatekeepers and respondents, of a kind of collegiate relationship between themselves and me. Being perceived - both by myself and others - as part of the business of delivering social work education has also facilitated the economy cited by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) as a further advantage of an insider perspective. This relates to the time saved for all concerned by the researcher having a degree of familiarity with the research focus (in this case the structure, component elements and contextual rules and regulations of the DipSW) which transcends that which might have been learned by an outsider. Through direct experience, I was already acquainted with certain of the cultural issues and language relating to the experience of working within Higher Education and to the role of the practice teacher. This seemed reassuring to the research participants and to imbue me with a certain credibility, which was important since most respondents were extremely busy and were being asked to make time, within already hard-pressed working lives, to engage in interviews. Student respondents too appeared more willing to engage with interviews on the basis of a sense of shared identity with me since, like them, I was engaged with a programme of study.

Many of the disadvantages of an insider perspective highlighted by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) relate to a situation where the researcher actually seeks membership, or uses existing immediate affiliation, of the group under study. This was not part of the approach within this research and so problems such as role conflict or reliance upon those respondents with whom I had existing ties did not arise. This said, I was conscious that a strategy for encouraging student participation that I had drawn upon was to remind potential student interviewees that I, like them, was engaged upon a programme of study and that I would be unable to successfully complete this without research respondents. Equally, however, there was the possibility that student respondents might perceive me as a social work tutor who, though not directly involved in their teaching and learning might nonetheless bring some influence to bear on their assessment. To offset this and in

response to what Gilbert (2008: 105) refers to as 'an acknowledgement of and reaction against the imbalance of power between the researcher and the researched', I was explicit in assuring students that their decision as to whether or not to participate – or indeed to withdraw – would in no way affect their progress on their respective programmes. Further consideration of my approach has been discussed above in terms of Ethics. Moreover, there was a need to bear in mind when interviewing all respondents, the risk that I might become seen as an advocate for a preferred direction in programme development and to clearly assert the lack of influence over this that I held. Similarly, there was a need to avoid relaxing into what often seemed a very familiar environment and to take care not to hear and see only what was expected on the basis of previous experience – in short, 'false economy' and over identification.

The disadvantages of the outsider perspective identified by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) are very much the converse of insider advantages. For example, the need to invest time in building trust and acceptance in order to gain access and encourage participation and a lack of economy in terms of researcher unfamiliarity with the focus of study. There are, however, certain distinct advantages to the outsider perspective. These include a more objective and possibly clearer perception and the possibility - as a temporary and external visitor - of eliciting views from respondents that they would feel less able to share with colleagues for fear of appearing disloyal or disturbing existing group dynamics. This last was evident on a number of occasions when respondents commented, for instance, 'I probably wouldn't say this in a meeting but....' or 'The programme might not like me saying this but...' A more detached investigator has then the potential to seek and gather data that might not be available to a researcher too closely associated with the insider perspective.

Serrant-Green (2002) suggests that perhaps even more important than how research subjects perceive the researcher is the question of how the researcher conceptualises and understands their own identity. Serrant-Green (2002:33) maintains that 'Researchers must constantly place themselves within the research, examining their own social identity alongside that of the population under study'. This view is reinforced by the experiences

encountered in the course of this research wherein the multiple dimensions of shared experience and identity carried a potential for confusion of role but also created opportunities for engagement with respondents. Remaining clear throughout that my involvement with each case study was on the basis of relevant experience of and association with DipSW programmes, both as course tutor and as practice teacher but, for the purposes of this research, was a purely investigative role was one of the most interesting challenges of the research process.

Data Analysis

Why a particular approach to data analysis has been adopted and how it has been applied are essential questions that must be clearly asked and answered by any researcher in order that their findings can be seen as having any real meaning. However, it is common for many discussions of qualitative data analysis (see, for example Robson 1993 and Bryman 2004) to open by citing Miles' (1979) description of qualitative data at pre-analysis stage as an 'attractive nuisance'. Attractive in the sense that such data is invariably rich and interesting and has the potential to yield fascinating insights. The 'nuisance' factor, however, refers both to the often unwieldy - and even unmanageable - amount of data collected and the problems associated with subjecting such data to analysis.

Bryman (2004:399) notes that:

> 'finding a path through the thicket of prose that makes up your data is not an easy matter ... in large part, this is because, unlike the analysis of quantitative data, there are few well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data.'

Nevertheless, tracing a clear path that leads from the raw data to the emergent concepts is a fundamentally important part of any research exercise. One response to the complexity associated with qualitative data analysis is to engage with computer-aided analysis, using

software packages such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti. The value of such packages in enabling storage, coding, retrieval and general management of large amounts of apparently cumbersome data is increasingly becoming recognised (Morse and Richards 2002). However, caution has also been expressed on the grounds that such clerical expediency can be dangerously seductive and may distance the researcher from the data but, ultimately, offer 'no substitute for genuinely 'grounded' engagement with the data throughout the whole of the research process' (Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson 1996: 11). For these reasons, computer-aided analysis has not been used within this research.

For many research methods commentators (Bell, 1999, Denscombe 2003, Gilbert 2008) qualitative data analysis relies upon and is guided by certain broad principles rather than established and prescriptive rules. Despite the fact that qualitative data analysis as an area is seen as developing rather than developed and one in which few fixed rules are to be found, a principle that has become firmly established is that of data analysis throughout – rather than upon completion of – data collection, For instance, Silverman (2000:121) urges that:

> 'data analysis does not come after data gathering. If you only have one interview or recording or set of field-notes, go to it! Where appropriate, start transcribing. In all cases, start reviewing your data in the light of your research questions'.

A further guiding principle in relation to qualitative data analysis that is propounded by, for example, Bryman (2004) and Silverman (2006) is the advice that it is the data that are most immediately pertinent to the research focus and aims that should be prioritized for interpretation. This means then that there may be areas of data arising and gathered in the course of a semi-structured interview that may be deemed by the researcher to be of marginal relevance to the central research questions. These are not data to be disregarded or dismissed. Equally, however, these may not be data that directly inform an area of analytic discussion. To illustrate with regard this research enquiry: practice teacher respondents at each of the three case study sites were asked what their habitual or preferred term for describing agency-based practice learning was. The responses to this question were then considered as part of a discussion regarding perceptions of training

and of education (see Chapter Six), rather than explicitly and in their own right. Similarly, practice teachers were invited to discuss their length of experience in the practice teaching role and the specific preparation for this that they had undertaken. Again, the data arising from these areas of interview dialogue were not used directly to inform discrete analytic themes but, rather, to inform the introductions to each of the case study sites and reports (see Chapter Five).

To return, however, to the emphasis upon the need for concurrent analysis aimed at facilitating an iterative interplay between data analysis and collection, this resonates with the grounded theory approach. Developed initially by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory advocates inductive development of theoretical ideas from empirical data. Since its inception, this approach has been subject to development and elaboration that has resulted in the emergence of different schools of grounded theorists and considerable debate as to what constitutes a 'true' grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000). Within this research study, however, the following definition by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 12) has been adopted:

> 'theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.'

As one of the most widely used frameworks for the analysis of qualitative data (Bryman 2004, Hodkinson 2008), grounded theory represents an almost inevitable underpinning influence upon the approach taken to data analysis within this research. It has been noted by a number of writers (Locke 1996, Charmaz, 2000, Hodkinson 2008), however, that many studies claim to have used a grounded theory approach but do not actually demonstrate this convincingly. As Bryman (2004: 401) puts it: 'Grounded theory is honoured more in the breach than in the observance'. It is important to state here then that no claim is made to the thematic use of grounded theory throughout the research. Instead, certain of the ideas associated with grounded theory have informed the approach taken to analysis and, rather than the development of new theory, the aim of this research has been to generate new ideas and understandings (D'Cruz and Jones 2004).

Denscombe (2003) summarises the grounded theory data analysis approach as characterised by a number of phases. First, the raw initial data (interview tapes and transcripts) are coded and these codes are categorised. Next, the ensuing data are constantly compared against these codes and categories with a view to refining these. As particular categories - that may appear to be unfolding concepts – emerge from the data, further data are collected and checked out against the existing codes and categories. This process continues until the point of theoretical saturation, that is when additional data simply confirms and does not add to or develop the categories that have been developed.

Bryman (2004) clarifies that essentially there are three levels of coding: firstly very basic coding that is largely descriptive, secondly more in-depth coding that looks for links between and begins to connect codes in order to draw out themes, or categories, from the data and thirdly yet more refined analytic coding that is concerned not only with the data content itself but also what may be inferred from it in terms of 'broad analytic themes' or concepts.

This is the process that has been carried out with the interview data generated by this research. Each interview was audio taped and then transcribed in full. Each transcript was then examined in detail and coding across the transcripts was developed, leading to the identification of emergent data categories against which each new transcript was constantly compared. This process was undertaken with the data deriving from interviews within each respondent group from within each case study and across the respondent groups and three case studies.

Presentation of Findings

Case study findings are generally presented by means of a case study report. For Yin (2003) such a report is a product in its own right and a central tenet of case study design is that all case study data are captured, contained and presented by means of and within

the report. Yin distinguishes between a number of formats of and structures for case study reporting. For example, he proposes that where single case study design has been deployed then a single narrative report that both describes and analyses the findings is appropriate. Clearly this is less straightforward where, as in this research, multiple case studies have been carried out and comparative, as well as cumulative, analysis is sought. Among the styles proposed by Yin for multiple case study reporting, however, is that of a question and answer format, based on the data gathering questions and answers. This has the virtue of laying out very clearly, precisely what has been explored and discovered within a given case study and Yin (2003: 148) suggests that quite simply: 'A reader need only examine the answers to the same question or questions within each case study to begin making cross-case comparisons.'

Three such case study reports were compiled following the data collection and analysis and are included as Appendices V, VI and VII. Each of these reports presents the case study setting and data for its respective site. This is an important means of adhering to the guidance by Yin (2003) and others (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster 2000, de Vaus (2001) on case study reporting. It also enables an important element of the research audience, namely those within the three case study sites, to readily access the findings relevant to them. Since this has been perceived both as a purpose and as an obligation within this research, the production of the case study reports as free standing entities has been carried out. Collectively, however, these reports represent far too lengthy and repetitive a description of the findings for the purposes of a doctoral thesis. Moreover, Yin's advice to readers of multiple case study reports that they engage with a kind of 'do-it-yourself' cross-study comparative analysis is recognised as unlikely to appeal to a thesis audience. Therefore a composite case study report (see Chapter Five) has been developed for inclusion within the thesis. This is based on the interview topic guides used and thus responds to the question and answer format proposed by Yin. It draws together and highlights similarities and differences across the three case studies and in doing so summarises the data from each, using illustrative extracts from each of the three free standing reports.

Summary

The aim and purpose of this chapter has been to explain both the thinking behind the research exercise and how it has been undertaken. To this end, the theory-research relationship has been discussed in terms of the predominant, though not exclusive, use of middle-range theorising and of a conscious interplay between deductive and inductive approaches to the use and development of knowledge. The informing epistemological and ontological considerations that have been drawn upon have been outlined as those of interpretivism and constructionism. A case study research strategy has been expounded and the rationale for and process of undertaking multiple case studies has been presented. Within each case study, the method of qualitative semi-structured interviewing as the chosen data collection technique has been examined as has the non-probability sampling approach. Access, ethics and researcher identity have been explored and, finally, the data analysis process, which has drawn upon some of the principles of grounded theory, has been considered.

The next chapter comprises the composite case study report. This is then followed by three further chapters, each of which presents analytic discussion of the collective data. An inherent but acknowledged drawback of this approach is that it may be experienced as separating the presentation and analysis of data. With this in mind, each section of each of the discussion chapters concludes with an explicit link to the relevant data within the composite report and thus the analytic discussion is consistently mapped against the findings.

Chapter Five: Composite Case Study Report

Introduction

This chapter consists of an extensive case study report which draws together the contexts and data from each of the three case studies in order to provide a composite account of these and the findings deriving from each site. The structure of this report chapter is as follows: each of the case study sites is introduced by means of contextual description that details the nature and structure of the respective programme, together with some opening observations from key informant interviewees. This initial outline of each programme is then built upon and 'clothed' through accounts of an observed student tutorial meeting within each site, the purpose of which is to present a typical flavour of the student experience of each of the programmes. The interview findings - from across the three case study sites - are then presented. An overall summary concludes the composite report.

Setting the Scene: Introducing the Case Study Programmes:

- Case Study Programme A:

Programme A is a four-year full time course of study leading to the award of BSc (Hons) in Social Policy and Social Work and the DipSW. Within this region of the UK, Programme A is one of four social work qualifying programmes offered by different Higher Education institutions. The other programmes within the geographical region are two two-year DipSW programmes and one two-year Masters level programme that encompasses the DipSW. Thus Programme A represents the only regional opportunity for undergraduate degree level study encompassing the DipSW award. It is offered on the basis of an arrangement between this university and several different neighbouring Local Authorities that have agreed to provide agency-based practice learning opportunities to programme students.

This university has a long tradition, spanning more than twenty five years, of offering qualifying social work education. Programme A is located within a School of Social Sciences as one of a range of social science degree courses. It is the only vocational programme leading to a specific professional qualification within the School. Programme A - as the most recent manifestation of the social work courses offered by this university - was validated in 1996 for a maximum of 50 students per intake. However, a consistent student drop out rate of around 10% means that commonly 35-40 students graduate annually.

The aim of Programme A is stated in the programme handbook as being 'to produce graduates who are accountable, reflective and self-critical practitioners.' In terms of teaching and learning processes, four 'inter-related themes' are highlighted in the programme handbook. These are listed as Awareness raising and knowledge acquisition, Conceptual understanding, Practice experience and, finally, 'Reflection on Performance – a process in which you reflect on past experience, recent performance and feedback, and apply this information to the process of integrating awareness and new understanding, leading to improved performance.'

In developing this case study, two key informant sources were drawn upon to provide contextual information about this programme. Both had been involved with this programme for more than five years. When discussing their perception of the relationship within this programme between competence-based and reflective learning approaches to social work education, key informant 1 described Programme A as *"remarkable for its excellent liaison with the field"* and, further, made the point that *"For us, the practice placement experience far outweighs any other learning processes within the institution."* The practice learning documentation refers to the purpose of practice learning as 'to provide students with the opportunity to evidence' the six DipSW core competences as well as the DipSW values requirements. Additionally, CCETSW Requirement 5.2.1(v)[4] is cited within this document: 'to demonstrate student's ability and capacity to reflect on

[4] Taken from 'Assuring Quality in the Diploma in Social Work'

their practice; transfer knowledge and skills and values in practice; and understand their response to dealing with change including personal learning style.'

Key informant 1 also observed that Programme A's approach to and use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is: *"... not as separate entities, but as coming together in a kind of fusion."* And further that: *"To over emphasise one or the other would be unacceptable."* Key informant 2 however commented that *"Inevitably you can't get away from the competences framework and we see this clearly in the DipSW modules. But throughout the contextual degree, we probably lean towards a more reflective approach."*

The first year and much of the second year of Programme A are integrated within a Joint Social Sciences Degree framework wherein students may transfer at the end of either years one or two to a three year programme leading to a Social Science degree with a specialism in either Sociology or Politics. From the outset of year two, students participate in Professional Development group tutorial meetings for the purpose of making explicit connections between agency-based practice learning and university-based teaching and learning. The following table demonstrates the detail of the composition and structure of Programme A:

Structure of Programme A

Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Year Four
Education Skills, Issues in Social Research and Computer Familiarisation	Research Methods: The Methodology of the Social Sciences	Reflexive Processes in Practice	Dissertation Preparation
Statistics for Social Scientists	Research Methods: Group Project	Dissertation Preparation	Social Work, Social Psychiatry and Mental Health
Development of Social Policy	Equality, Opportunity and Social policy	Social Work Theory and Concepts	Contemporary Social Issues
Contemporary Social Policy: British and European Perspectives	European Comparative Social Policy	Social Work Practice in Context	EITHER: Penal Policy and Social Welfare OR Children, Youth, Crime and Social Policy
European Social Structures	The Social Construction of Welfare	Law and Practice	EITHER: Social Work with Children and Families OR Social Work and Old Age OR Health, Disability and Social Work
Social Processes in Modern European Society	Social Work Practice and Skills	Social Work with Children and Families	
Britain: Institutions and Politics	General Law and Welfare Benefits	Welfare Organisations: The delivery of Welfare	
Contemporary Issues in Social Work	Professional Legislation for Social Workers		
Interpersonal Communication Skills	Communities and Agencies		
Introduction to Applied Psychology	Social Work Values		
30-day Introductory Social Work Learning Placement (Block)		50-day Social Work Placement (Block)	80-day Social Work Placement (Block)

• Adding Context to Programme A: Observation of Student Tutorial Meeting:

This observation was undertaken involving a university-based tutor (not also interviewed) and five third year students (none of whom were also interviewed). The observed group tutorial meeting involved third year students rather than those in their final year (representatives of whom had been interview respondents). This was because this programme calendar scheduled no further group tutorial meetings for final year students during the academic session framing the data collection period. Third year students had, however, completed the first (50-day) period of practice learning and three quarters of the academic session by the time of the observation. The setting was the tutor's office which was large enough to accommodate a semi circle of chairs for the five students present. The tutor sat by her desk with her chair facing the students.

The observation was of a one hour, timetabled group tutorial meeting which did not have a pre-set agenda but, rather, was an open opportunity for students to raise issues in a self-directed manner. The tutorial commenced with the tutor asking students '*What would you like to talk about today?*' Student responses and ensuing discussion addressed three main areas in the following order: **i)** student anxiety regarding and planning for the Social Work Theory and Concepts module assessment event, **ii)** student enquiry as to standards of practice teaching (and the Practice Teaching Award as part of this), and **iii)** a discussion between students and the tutor as to preparation for the final year 80-day period of practice learning.

i) Student anxiety regarding module assessment

One student expressed anxiety about a forthcoming exam in relation to the Social Work Theory and Concepts module: *'It's a three hour exam and I feel like you need to know a lot to respond to that and that I just don't.'* (Student 3). This was quickly echoed by Student 2 who commented *'I feel okay with the lecture stuff, you know the basics of the different theories and who said what about them. But I'm not comfortable about the stuff we did in seminars around putting it into practice.'* Student 1 offered reassurance with: *'It's not complicated stuff – you just need to know a little about a lot of different theories'*. The tutor asked whether students had approached the module lecturer for

preparatory guidance and Students 2 and 3 confirmed that they had and that the module lecturer had agreed to provide summaries of each area of teaching input – but these students continued to express that they felt unsure about how to relate these different theoretical/conceptual areas to practice. A general discussion among students followed regarding this module as a 'hard' element of the programme and to the effect that six students had failed this assessment the previous year. The tutor suggested that the module lecturer be asked to provide *'an example of an application to practice'*. Student 4 commented: *'I have been listening in lectures but they didn't sink in, I didn't retain anything.'* After briefly reassuring students that re-sit arrangements are available in the event of failed assessments, the tutor stated *'You're all really strong, all of you, in both the college and your placements – so what's this about? Is it general anxiety about being assessed?'* No immediate response came from the students and the tutor moved on to ask: *'What would be helpful for you in looking at these topics?'* All students who replied said that they would find the previously mentioned summaries helpful and the tutor suggested that they access and read these in readiness for the next group tutorial meeting *'so you can all check out your understanding.'* Student 5 commented: *'I learn by talking things through so for me it would be brilliant to hear and share ideas.'* No response to this was made by either the tutor or other students.

ii) Student enquiry regarding standards of practice teaching

Student 1 stated: *'In my 50-day placement I had a really good practice teacher but now I'm worried about my expectations and the standard* [of practice teaching] *I'm expecting for the 80 days.'* There was general agreement between the students that tales of poor practice teachers were in circulation between students and that this was *'anxiety-creating'*. The tutor highlighted that, on the basis of their experience from the 50-day period of practice learning, students will be *'equipped better'* but Student 1 replied: *'It's not just about familiarity with the packs, it's about the general standard of work that your practice teacher does with you.'* The tutor confirmed that the minimum standard for: *'practice teachers we use is that they must all already have the Practice Teaching Award or be working towards it.'* Student 2 said: *'Yes but, for example ADP* [anti discriminatory practice], *some do it with us because they have to or some do it as a way of life'*. Other

students put forward a range of questions as to how long a social worker must be qualified before undertaking the Practice Teaching Award, how long the Award takes, and what stage in the Award must be reached before a candidate may take students. The tutor briefly explained the Practice Teaching Award process and concluded with *'Just about every practice teacher is different; some may be very experienced but set in their ways and/or some may be new and fresh.'* No student response was made to this and the tutor's comment appeared to signal the end of this discussion.

iii) Preparation for practice learning

The tutor reminded students that, within the next three weeks, they should each complete 'Learning Needs' forms issued by this programme, as part of their preparation for their final year 80-day period of practice learning. Students pointed out that these forms had very little space and asked if they could attach appendices. The tutor advised that this is permissible and informed students that, within these forms, they should discuss not only what they have learned from their 50-day periods of practice learning but also what they have learned in the course of subsequent university-based teaching. The tutor prompted consideration of this by asking: *'So what have you learned?'* Those students who replied framed their responses in terms of the DipSW core competences or practice requirements. For example: *'I've learned more about working in organisations'* (Student 5) and *'I've learned stuff about the application of law and policy, particularly around mental health'* (Student 1).

The tutor moved the discussion on to a discussion of students' individual strengths (also apparently requiring discussion by students on their 'Learning Needs' forms) by stating: *'I find students often struggle in identifying strengths. Can you identify your strengths?'* Student responses were various but uniformly negative e.g. *'No'* (Student 1), *'Not at the moment'* (Student 5), *'None'* (Student 3) and *'I've forgotten any'* (Student 2). The tutor said: *'Oh, come on. I know you all have loads – especially inner strengths.'* This was followed by a silence which was eventually broken by the tutor observing: *'It's really hard to identify strengths isn't it?'*

Student 5 asked: *'Do practice teachers choose us – or not choose us – on the basis of the information we put on our forms?'* The tutor did not reply directly to this but instead explained that as much information from students about themselves is helpful so: *'the placement can prepare to receive you.'* And then added: *'But you need to protect yourselves in terms of self disclosure.'*

Returning to the theme of strengths, the tutor asked: *'Can you each say one strength and/or your learning style?'* And followed this quickly with: *'Not if you don't want to.'* Again, silence ensued and the tutor broke this by asking if students were familiar with the Honey and Mumford learning styles questionnaire?[5] One student replied that she had no knowledge of this whilst the others said nothing. The tutor then asked: *Does it not feel safe enough* [to discuss this] *or too difficult?'* No response came from the students and the tutor suggested that they could administer the learning styles questionnaire to one another.

Student 5 agreed to this proposal and went on to say that she felt her *'time management is very poor'* and that she had experienced considerable stress during the 50-day practice learning opportunity because she'd felt that she was running out of time to assemble her overall 'pack' of evidence. Student 4 said she had not used the learning styles questionnaire and was advised by the tutor to seek the reference from another tutor. The tutor told the students: *'You need this information* [about yourselves] *as on the final placement you need to show how you've incorporated your learning style into the placement and accommodated your practice teacher's style.'* This comment appeared to prompt student responses; Student 1: *'I'm a reflector. I like to read a lot and I've got a good memory'* (this student had earlier replied 'no' when asked if she could identify any strengths and the tutor responded with *'that wasn't so hard to say was it?'*), Student 2: *'I need to feel prepared and be really well prepared. I work hard at this. I'm a reflector/activist.'*, Student 3: *'I'm a reflector/pragmatist. I realised when on my*

[5] Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1992), 2nd edition, *'The Manual of Learning Styles'*, Maidenhead: Peter Honey - this includes a questionnaire through which learners may identify their preferred learning style as that of a 'reflector', an 'activist', a 'pragmatist' or a 'theorist', or a combination of these. The questionnaire is commonly used by social work practice teachers in their work with students.

placement I had to reflect a lot and I did. I think a lot about essays, even though I always end up very last minute.' The tutor probed Student 3, asking her to name a strength and the student responded with: *'Communication, I suppose.'*

The tutor summarised with: *'Good. You've all managed to say a strength and have some feedback. Have a go at the placement forms and think about an agenda for next time.'* General agreement came from the students as they prepared to leave and the tutor thanked them for: *'a really good session.'*

• Case Study Programme B:

Programme B is a two-year full time DipSW/MA course. On completion of two years of study, students may exit with the DipSW qualification (and a Diploma in Higher Education (Social Work)). However, students who successfully complete both all elements of the DipSW course and an optional additional second year module in social science research design and methodology may also engage with year two seminars providing dissertation support and guidance and may submit a dissertation by the December following their completion of the DipSW for the award of MA in Social Work.

Programme B is one of two social work qualifying programmes offered within this region of the UK, the other being a two-year DipSW programme with an optional third year leading to a degree in Social Science. Thus Programme B is the sole regional opportunity for Masters level study encompassing the DipSW award. It is offered on the basis of an arrangement between this university and several different neighbouring Local Authorities that have agreed to provide agency-based practice learning opportunities to programme students.

This university has provided qualifying social work programmes for more than thirty years. The current DipSW/MA programme was validated and introduced in 1995 for an annual intake of 50 students. Entrants are usually graduates but non-graduates may also

be accepted. The programme is situated within a School of Social Sciences and Education and is one of a suite of social work qualifying and post-qualifying (PQ) programmes offered by the School. An MSc/Advanced Award in Social Work is available for social work practitioners with a minimum of two years' post-qualifying experience as are PQ Child Care and Community Care programmes. A Professional Doctorate (Social Work) course of study is also offered. Social work education and training is the only vocational social science study offered within the School though a programme leading to a professional teaching qualification is also available.

No explicit programme aim, beyond the attainment by students of the DipSW qualification, and no specific references to teaching and learning processes are mentioned in the Programme B programme handbook or practice learning documentation. However, within the context of assessment requirements, Programme 2's handbook cites CCETSW Regulation 3.5.1 [6]: 'Evidence of conceptualisation, critical analysis, reflection and transfer of knowledge, skills and values is essential for the award of the DipSW, and students must be required to provide this evidence in written work and in practice.'

In developing this case study, three key informant interviews were conducted to provide background information about Programme B. All had been involved with this programme for more than eight years. Key informant 1 described Programme B's approach to teaching and learning as follows: *"Different modules have different emphases. We don't have in any sense a uniform or universal theme running through our approach to learning. It's not something we consciously try and construct."* Also, however, key informant 1 noted: *"We tend to err slightly on the side of reflective learning in that we see this as equally demonstrated in relation to placements and through what goes on in the small group, seminar-based teaching that is a feature of this course."* Key informant 2 expressed a different perception, however, when discussing practice learning: *"It feels as if the fact that there are practice requirements to be demonstrated and evidenced, drives a very competence-based process – and this doesn't seem to get mitigated by this programme."* Key informant 2 described the approach to practice learning of Programme

[6] Taken from 'Rules and Requirements for the DipSW'

B students as: *"a very linear, checklist approach wherein there's a real 'done that, evidenced it, let's move on' feel from the students and they just don't seem to see things more holistically."* This perception was endorsed by key informant 3 who outlined the approach to teaching and learning of Programme B in the following terms: *"The emphasis in college teaching is certainly more about the reflective stuff but placements seem to have been driven down the competence-based road."*

The following table shows the composition and structure of Programme B:

Structure of Programme B

Year One	Year Two	MA Dissertation
Anti-Discriminatory Practice	Social Work Core Competences II	Students pursuing the MA award are awarded the DipSW at the end of Year Two (July) but may submit the MA dissertation at any point up until the following December.
Social Work Core Competences I	EITHER: Social Work with Children and Families OR Social Work and Physical Illness, disability and Older People OR Social work and Mental Health OR Youth Social Work	
Social Work with Children and Families	Organisational Contexts: Preparing for Practice	
Youth Social Work	Social Work Evaluation	
Social Work and Community Care	Principles and Practice of Research Design (optional – only for students pursuing MA award)	
Social Work and the Law	Dissertation Seminars (optional – only for students pursuing MA award)	
Anti-Poverty Strategies for Social Workers	Special Interest Workshops	
Applied Social Science (Sociology and Social Policy)		
Crime and Deviance		
Life Transitions and Psychology		
Social Work Skills		
Information Technology and Social Work		
50-day Social Work Placement (Block)	80-day Social Work Placement (Integrated: 3 days in agency/2 days in university)	

• Adding Context to Programme B: Observation of Student Tutorial Meeting:

This observation involved a university-based tutor (not also interviewed) and seven final year students (none of whom were also interviewed) engaging in a 50-minute, timetabled group tutorial meeting. The students were nearing completion of their 80-day practice learning opportunities and the tutorial was part of a university 'recall' day. The setting was a small teaching room with a 'boardroom' style table arrangement around which students sat with the tutor at the head of the table.

The tutor set the agenda for the meeting by proposing: *'I think we should go round and share what's happening on your placements.'* He then clarified that opportunities for students to meet with him individually would be available after the group meeting. What followed within the tutorial was discussion by each of the students in turn of their experiences within their current practice learning opportunities. Whilst there were sometimes brief interjections from other students within the group (e.g. *'I've visited that place too.'*) and occasional shared humour, the format of the meeting was that one student at a time presented their experiences and responded to questions or observations from the tutor.

Student 7 stated: *'I'm doing fine'* and proceeded to give a fairly detailed description of her agency setting (a community mental health team) in terms of its brief and the staff within it. Student 7 said *'I've had my fingers dipped in so many aspects of mental health'* and then, as an illustration of this, talked about a visit to a specific forensic service. The tutor asked: *'What kinds of work are you undertaking?'* and Student 7 replied: *'I've done an assessment and various one to one bits of work – I don't know if you'd call it counseling, that type of thing'* adding that she'd wanted to become involved with some group work within the practice learning agency but the time limited nature of her period of practice learning had precluded this. She then stated that she was working with: *'one woman I've got very, very close to.'* Student 7 was not asked to expand on this statement; instead Student 6 was turned to by the tutor to provide the next contribution.

Student 6 reported: *'I'm at a residential rehabilitation centre for mothers and their children. The approach* [used by the agency] *is cognitive therapy. I didn't really like that – it's brought up a lot of values things for me.'* Student 6 explained further that, in the course of the practice learning opportunity, she has visited other similar resources and discovered that a range of theoretically informed approaches are used in their work. She said: *'It's been good* [to make these visits] *otherwise I would have left the placement thinking cognitive therapy was the only approach.'* In response to a question from the tutor, Student 6 briefly outlined some of the specific learning opportunities she has engaged with. These included being a key worker for a small number of residents and liaising with other agencies on their behalf. Student 6 also noted that some of the service users she'd encountered had been *'anti social workers and social services'* and observed: *'That was a bit strange at first and I didn't want to say about training to become a social worker. But my confidence has grown.'* The tutor response to this was to nod and to indicate to the next student that it was now their turn to speak.

Student 5 briefly described her practice learning opportunity setting – a residential school for children and young people aged 10-16 years before commenting: *'I'm a little too well accepted as I've become a punch bag.'* She then revealed a substantial number of large bruises on each of her arms to the group. She was encouraged by other students to roll up her sleeves to demonstrate the full extent of this bruising. The tutor asked: *'How are you feeling about that?'* and Student 5 replied with a discussion of *'the volatile behaviour of the kids'*, citing examples of this and recounting episodes she had observed or been involved with. She concluded: *'You've got to remember it's not personal – it's not directed at you'*. Another student asked *'Does that help?'* and Student 5 responded: *'Well, the first thing you want to do is whack them back.'* This was greeted with laughter or smiles from the rest of the students. The tutor asked a number of questions about health and safety procedures within the setting and the physical restraint training that Student 5 had accessed. Student 5 confirmed her knowledge – and apparent confidence – in both these areas before going on to refer to her involvement with one particular case and to note: *'I've met all the core competences and the values and things so they'll*

[agency staff] *let me go anywhere and do anything now.'* The tutor did not respond directly to this statement other than to nod and to make a general observation to the group at large as to the importance of consistency of staff approach in residential settings. He then asked the next student to talk.

Student 4 provided a descriptive outline of her practice learning setting within a hostel for people with alcohol problems. She repeatedly used 'we' to describe the work of the agency and added: *'I'm not scared of them* [service users] *anymore. I think my confidence has grown; I'm not inhibited by them. I've found out that we've got paedophiles and sex offenders* [within the hostel] *but it's good to have situations like that to test your value system.'* The tutor made no direct comment regarding these observations but instead asked about safety issues in relation to the student who replied: *'I'm never on my own. But at night sometimes it's just two females* [staff members] *on and I think that's wrong.'* Again, the tutor did not respond directly to this but, to the group as a whole, commented that: *'a lot of service users are 'graduates' of the public care system.'* Student 4 responded, with reference to a particular service user with whom she had been working: *'I didn't like him at all but then, talking to him about his history, it does change your opinion.'* Student 3 was then asked by the tutor to update the group on their practice learning experiences.

Student 3 introduced her practice learning setting as a supported housing project for people with mental health problems and talked about her key working role with a recently admitted resident. The tutor asked a question about the theoretical orientation of the work and the student replied: *'carrot and stick, it seems like.'* The tutor said: *'You're applying a cognitive-behavioural approach then, aren't you?'* There was then general laughter from the students. At this point the tutor received a mobile telephone call and left the room. Student 3 then began referring to other students' practice learning opportunities in terms of links between these and her own setting and experiences. For instance, Students 3 and 5 discussed the use of physical restraint within their respective settings and Student 3 reiterated Student 5's earlier point that: *'their* [service users'] *behaviour should not be personalised.'*

The tutor returned to the room and immediately asked Student 2: *'Tell us how you're doing.'* Student 2 described his practice learning in a youth justice setting and the social work role and tasks associated with this e.g. accompanying a young person to a police interview in the role of 'appropriate adult'. Student 2 said: *'I went to Court on Monday and I ended up phoning the manager about a procedure that had never happened before. It was sad because I felt that if I knew the procedures I wouldn't have had to.'* No comment on this was made by the tutor who simply nodded before looking at Student 1.

Student 1 spent some time explaining his practice learning arrangements which were taking place under the general auspices of a national mental health charitable organisation but specifically within two separate drop-in centres and an employment project. Student 1 directly addressed Student 7 as he spoke and the two students discussed their shared knowledge of the recent closure of a local small psychiatric hospital. Student 1 said: *'In my past I'd worked in a drop-in centre for young people. Plus, I already knew about people coming out of W* [a local large psychiatric hospital which remains open] *with terrible stories. The trauma of hospital will stick in my mind.'* Student 1 also commented: *'I'm already a visitor to W – I was a buddy for 13 years to a young self harmer. Now I can see things that I'd learned with him happening down in the drop in centres.'* Student 1 was not asked to expand on or explain these observations.

By now the tutorial period was almost over and this was confirmed by the tutor glancing at his watch. He said: *'Briefly, then, there are some interesting links between your placements – and it's good if you can share your experiences.'* The tutor then concluded the tutorial meeting by reminding students that he was available to meet with them individually that day *'on request'* and leaving the room.

• Case Study Programme C:

Programme C is a two-year full time DipSW (and Diploma in Higher Education (Social Work)) course. Within this UK region, Programme C is one of four qualifying social work programmes offered by different Higher Education institutions. Each of these other programmes provide the DipSW award as part of undergraduate social science degree courses and thus Programme C represents the only regional opportunity to achieve the DipSW within a two year period. Programme C is offered on the basis of on the basis of an arrangement between this university and several different neighbouring Local Authorities that have agreed to provide agency-based practice learning opportunities to programme students.

Qualifying social work education programmes have been provided by this university for some thirty five years. The current DipSW programme has been in existence since 1993 and is validated for up to 70 students per annual intake. Approximately one third of these students are employees of partner agencies who have been seconded. Both seconded and direct entry students engage with the same teaching and learning on a full time basis. Programme C is located within a Faculty of Health and Social Care that, as well as social work education provides an extensive range of vocational diploma and degree courses leading to specific professional qualifications in aspects of health care and community work.

Programme C provides a general programme handbook, a guide to the Year One and Two social work placements and a module handbook for each of these years, detailing the content of and teaching arrangements for each of the modular sequences that make up the programme. Within this documentation, no overall programme aim beyond the attainment by students of the DipSW award and no specific references to teaching and learning processes beyond the arrangements for each module are made. However, the programme handbook, in its introduction to students, states: 'Each of you will come to the programme with different experience, knowledge, understanding and skills .... what

you learn on the DipSW programme will depend as much on you and other students as it does on us as teaching staff.'

In developing this case study, one key informant source, who had been involved with this programme for more than six years, was used to provide a contextual overview of this programme. This key informant described Programme C as follows: *"It's a balance; we offer a mix of competence-based education aimed at meeting occupational and employers' requirements and more critically-based learning opportunities that try to get students to really think about who they are in relation to their social work practice, to be reflective practitioners."*

The composition and structure of Programme C is outlined in the following table:

Structure of Programme C

Year One	Year Two
Interprofessional Module 1 (Social Policy, Public Health and Collaborative Working) *Interprofessional module*	Interprofessional Module 2 (Skills for/Infrastructure of Professional Practice and Reflective Practice) *Interprofessional module*
Preparation for Study and Practice (the 6 DipSW Core Competences and Values and Reflective Practice) *Uniprofessional module*	Personal and Professional Development (Use of Theory in Practice, Research Methods and Sources and Anti-oppressive Practice) *Uniprofessional module*
Foundations in Psychology and Social Science *Interprofessional module*	EITHER: Social work with Children and Young People *Uniprofessional module* OR: Working with Adults in the context of Community Care *Interprofessional module*
Anti-oppressive Practice and the Law *Uniprofessional module*	Law, Justice and Equality *Uniprofessional module*
50-day Social Work Placement (Block)	80-day Social Work Placement (Block)

Interprofessional module = a module where social work students are taught and learn alongside students from a range of other disciplines and programmes within the Faculty including BSc (Hons) courses in Adult and Children's Nursing, Learning Disability, Mental Health, Midwifery, Physiotherapy and Radiotherapy and a Diploma course in Community and Youth Work.

Uniprofessional module = a module where social work students are taught and learn in a single disciplinary group i.e. with other DipSW students only.

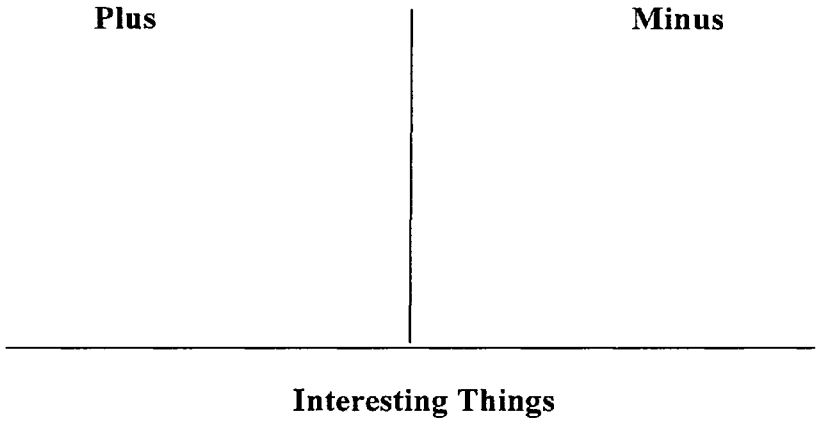
- Adding Context to Programme C: Observation of Student Tutorial Meeting:

This observation was of a university-based tutor (not also interviewed) and eight final year students (none of whom were also interviewed) coming together for a 50-minute, timetabled group tutorial meeting. All of the students were seconded from their local employment and all had undertaken their Year One 50-day practice learning within their workplaces. The students were nearing completion of their 80-day practice learning opportunities and, although some further university-based teaching days were scheduled,

this was their final timetabled group tutorial meeting. The setting was a teaching room with chairs arranged in circular formation around a flip chart.

The tutor began by proposing the following agenda for the meeting: any current outstanding issues for students, student evaluation of the tutorial support available to them during their agency-based practice learning, and the negotiation and arrangement of individual tutorial meetings for those students wishing these. She then informed the group: *'This is our last group contact but it's not goodbye forever: I will be available for placement support until the end of the course and then for the partying and celebrations.'* Student 4 asked: *'What are we evaluating exactly?'* Student 6 then commented: *'Some of the content of the course has been appalling – but I can't write that down, of course.'* The tutor responded by asking the whole group: *'What is the purpose of evaluation? Why do we evaluate?'* Student 3 suggested: *'To improve? And therefore it should be constructive?'* Murmurs and nods of agreement came from the students sitting closest to Student 3.

The tutor then said: *'Suppose we look at this'* and introduced the following diagram (using the flip chart) as a structure for evaluating, noting: *'This comes from de Bono; the guy who coined the idea of lateral thinking'*[7]:



[7] Edward de Bono (1933 -), an applied psychologist who has developed a range of 'deliberate thinking methods' aimed at stimulating conscious, systematic thought. Author of 'The Use of Lateral Thinking' (1967).

Having drawn this on the flip chart, the tutor said: *'It's often helpful to start with Interesting Things and then see if any of these can be put into the Plus or Minus columns.'* She added: *'Evaluation forms are useful, but if their content is non-specific then no discussion is possible.'* Student 7 said: *'Yes, but I know that to pass this course I have to write to and meet certain evaluation criteria – and that's what I'm going to do.'* Again, students sitting nearby endorsed this comment with nods and murmured agreement. Student 4 asked: *'Do we evaluate the whole course?'* This met with general agreement from the other students in the group. However, the tutor stated: *'I think you could have a discussion about that next time you're in college. Can we check up on any outstanding issues or queries any of you have?'*

Student 3 asked if practice teachers are required to sign their confirmation of students' full attendance at their practice learning opportunity and other students told her that this is so. Student 4 commented that there appeared to be a confusing range of feedback forms in the Portfolio handbook and this lead to an outbreak of discussion amongst the students – and Student 3 realising that a new and different handbook to the one that she had been referring to had been issued. Student discussion moved on to debate as to which days within the programme calendar are considered annual leave, 'college work' days and 'placement' days. The tutor intervened and summarised with: *'So it sounds like the outstanding issues you have are of a practical nature and to do with things like Portfolio requirements. Please bring these up with me in our individual sessions.'*

The tutor then gestured at the de Bono diagram and asked students to comment on the *'pros and cons as you see them.'* Student 3 said: *'As our tutor you've always really been there. Like, always available to deal with placement issues.'* The tutor asked if her freelance working status had compromised this at all and Student 5 said: *'I think it's been good actually because we see you as a bit detached and independent from the university. But you've always stuck inside your role and your boundaries.'* Student 6 commented: *'I've got more information and understanding about university requirements from you than I have from the staff here.'* The tutor acknowledged and noted this feedback in the Plus column of the diagram and suggested a possible Minus arising from her freelance

status in terms of students not having instant access to answers or information from the university i.e. students would have to wait for her to follow up their queries with university staff. Student 5 said: *'No – it's better to ask your question and wait for an answer than it is to not be able to contact anyone.'* Student 6 said: *'I'm very critical of the university generally and therefore you as a tutor have been pretty good.'* Student 8 was asked directly by the tutor for his comments but he replied that he had nothing to add.

Students 1, 2 and 3 then began to talk to one another about two teaching sessions at the beginning of Year 2 that they referred to as *'PPD'*. Comments included: *'Wasn't that supposed to be about theory and reflection and stuff?'* (Student 1) and *'That ended up just being about placements didn't it?* (Student 2). Student 3 observed that these sessions had not culminated in: *'Any outcomes or action plans or anything'* and then suggested that the tutor could perhaps usefully have been introduced to students at that point. Student 4 noted that their tutor group (of seconded students) had been offered an additional taught session by a university-based tutor, looking specifically at the requirements for the 80-day period of practice learning and that it would have been useful if their tutor had been linked in to this.

Student 6 commented that he had liked the tutor's tendency to use visual strategies such as today's diagram and that he had welcomed the opportunities afforded by the tutor group to discuss *'placement issues'* with others. Student 4, nodding her agreement, said: *'I wish there had been more time on recall days to learn from each other somehow – the days always seem to have been pretty tightly structured with lectures.'* The tutor began noting these observations on the flip chart diagram whilst a few students commented to one another that they would have valued more time and opportunities for peer support and sharing of information and learning and Student 2 suggested: *'We could have cross-read each other's Portfolios couldn't we?'* Student 5 said: *'We've been lectured at and I just feel it's been a huge waste of the wealth of experience there is among students.'* Student 7 said: *'Lots of the course has been a huge waste of time. Five or six weeks on research? It's not useful – I can't see the point.'* Student 4 stated: *'This placement has*

been a huge amount of learning, though.' Many students nodded their agreement to this and Student 4 continued: *'I want to demonstrate this but I've really struggled with the how of this. I mean, you know, critical reflection and appraisal. How do you reflect on your work and learn from this?'* Student 5 responded: *'We've not been reflecting in lectures or other groups, other than here. It's been a chance for consolidation that has been lost.'* Student 6 said: *But this course is just about a bit of paper isn't it? We've got to remember that. Now* [i.e. post qualification] *we'll start to learn from practice.'* The tutor responded to these comments by mentioning various post qualifying training opportunities such as practice teaching and PQ Awards and telling the group: *'You're right to view where you are now as merely the beginning – there is so much more out there that you can access so that you go on developing.'*

Student discussion returned to the issue raised earlier by Student 7 of teaching input around research in social work and there was general agreement that this had not seemed immediately relevant. Student 7 summarised with: *'I can see it's necessary – but maybe at PQ level; not as part of the basic DipSW.'* Student 6 observed: *'I'm a bit sceptical that it was more to do with the lecturer's special interest than it was to do with our need.'*

Student 5 commented: *'I would say that a lot of our needs have been kind of overlooked.'* and this lead on to a general student discussion around the difficulty of being in the role of student (for the purposes of practice learning) in agency settings where individuals were already known in their employed capacity. Comments on the 50-day practice learning experience included: *'Nobody recognised us as students'* (Student 1) and *'We were just working'* (Student 4). The tutor asked: *'Do you remember when we were doing learning objectives* [for the 80-day period of practice learning] *and I was encouraging you to have that as an objective – how to be a student?'* Students indicated their agreement to this and there was general agreement among them that the 80-day practice learning period had been *'better'*, *'easier'*, *'much more about learning'*.

The tutor noted that the session time was close to finishing and reminded the students that a further evaluative opportunity for them was to use 'placement evaluation' forms. She

asked if people were ready to finish. Student 4 said that it would be interesting to know what others in the group were doing in terms of jobs and the tutor replied: *'Are you proposing that as a way of ending the session? Because we haven't really got time now. Is that something you can do over coffee?'* Some students nodded agreement and this ended the group tutorial meeting. Some students then waited in turn to book individual appointments with the tutor whilst others left the room.

Interview Data:

In addition to the contextual discussion with key informants regarding their respective programmes, a total of 34 individual interviews were undertaken across the three case studies. These were as follows: Case Study A: four programme personnel (one agency-based/three university-based), all of whom had been involved with this programme for more than four years; five practice teachers, all of whom worked solely with this programme and had done so for between three and ten years and who had also successfully undertaken the Practice Teaching Award[8]; and three students, each of whom were in the final year of this programme and presently mid-way through their 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. Case Study B: four programme personnel (two agency-based/two university-based), all of whom had been involved with this programme for more than seven years; five practice teachers, who had worked with this programme for between three and nine years and of whom three had successfully undertaken the Practice Teaching Award (the other two had completed a more basic introductory training course); and four students, each of whom were in the final year of this programme and were mid-way through their 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. Case Study C: three programme personnel (one agency-based/two university-based), all of whom had been involved with this programme for more than five years; three practice teachers, who

[8] This was introduced in 1989 as a CCETSW (subsequently replaced by the General Social Care Council in England and by Care Councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) award. The award is managed and delivered through regional consortia and is for social work qualification holders with at least two years' post qualifying experience of social work. The award training programmes address six key aspects of the practice teacher role: supervisory relationships and skills in supervision, management of the period of practice learning, assessment, the social work value base, critical reflection and professional development.

had worked with this programme for between four and seven years and who had also successfully completed the Practice Teaching Award; and three students each of whom were close to the end of their final year of this programme and had completed their 80-day period of agency-based practice learning.

Breakdown of Interview Respondents

	CASE STUDY A BSc (Hons) Social Policy and Social Work/DipSW	**CASE STUDY B** DipSW/MA Social Work	**CASE STUDY C** DipSW
Programme Personnel Respondents (university-based)	**3**	**2**	**2**
Programme Personnel Respondents (agency-based)	**1**	**2**	**1**
Practice Teacher Respondents	**5**	**5**	**3**
Student Respondents	**3**	**4**	**3**
Total Respondents	**12**	**13**	**9**

Findings:

• **Section a**: Understandings of competence-based and reflective learning approaches; how/where each is to be found within this programme; whether either is thought to be predominantly in evidence on the respective programmes

• Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning:

▶ Within Case Studies A and C the competence-based approach was seen, across student, practice teacher and programme personnel respondent groups, as predominantly

recognizable in and illustrated by the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students as a DipSW requirement and thus as part of the programme. This was demonstrated in the following responses:

"I would assume that would be on practice [learning] and you would have to hit certain competencies that were expected." (Case Study A: Student Respondent 1)

"I think it has been the foundation of how students have approached their practice learning." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"It's what we do on placement." (Case Study C: Student respondent 1)

"Practice is not the only example, but possibly the main or clearest one where we use this approach." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

▶By student and programme personnel respondents from Case Studies A, B and C, however, the competence-based approach was also discerned within university-based teaching and learning. For example the learning outcomes of modules were described in the following terms:

"...heavily influenced by the competency curriculum." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3).

"If you look at the learning outcomes for the different modules that you get at the beginning, you can see, I think, that they're really talking about kinds of competences too." (Case Study C: Student respondent 1)

"It would be through the learning outcomes of each module, academically." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Furthermore:

"Within the social work modules and essays that we have had to write, there have been certain elements that we have had to hit." (Case Study 1: Student respondent 1)

"We had core competences teaching in seminars every week." (Case Study B: Student respondent 1)

"We are quite clear, I think, that whilst students go out into practice to provide positive evidence of their competence base, it is also demonstrable while they are engaged in college." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶ Within Case Studies A and C, the competence-based approach was understood across all respondent groups in terms of a 'breakdown' and as to do with 'specific areas/elements' of social work. This was also expressed by some Case Study B programme personnel and by Case Study B practice teacher respondents. For example:

"It is about specific elements of more general tasks or areas of practice and it is about very clear criteria." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"It is about breaking it [social work] down isn't it? That is how I would describe it." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

Or, as more pithily summarised by a student respondent:

"Those dreadful grids." (Case Study A: Student respondent 3)

"It takes apart the whole business, really, and breaks it down into what we need to be looking for." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"It helps by breaking down and showing you what you've got to do." (Case Study C: Student respondent 1)

"It defines the different functions of social work and, within these, highlights particular aspects that need to be understood by students." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"Almost like an MOT, sort of like tick box." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"It's the matrix or grid thing isn't it? Where social work gets broken down into the basics of the job so students can see exactly what they've got to show on placement." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

▶ However, only one out of the four Case Study B student respondents shared this view whilst others, and programme personnel respondents, expressed the perception that the competence-based approach involves more than practical demonstration in response to specified areas of social work practice For example, one student respondent discussed their understanding as follows:

"Also including the values and ethics, the social justice and social welfare, and incorporating all of that as a whole – so that is my understanding of the competency base." (Case Study B: Student respondent 3)

A programme personnel respondent contrasted their perception of the use of the competence-based approach within social work education with its place within National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) awards by stating:

"The reflective part [of the competence-based approach], it seems to be much more important than what you do and how you do it." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

And for another programme personnel respondent, the competence-based approach explicitly embodied a relevant knowledge base as follows:

"To carry out any aspect of social work competently, that is in a way that is good enough to pass their placements; students need to show how theory and research have informed their work." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

▶The competence-based approach was seen by a minority of practice teacher respondents across the three case studies and by one Case Study A programme personnel respondent as a reductionist and fragmented approach e.g.

"I just get very frustrated by this idea that you can take a student and teach them about social work as a job through this kind of splitting down of everything into so many competences and so many requirements etc.. To me, it's dumbing down what is a really very complex profession." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"There is a danger that it would be kind of a reduction." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

However, one Case Study A student respondent proposed the focussed and demarcated nature of a competence-based framework for learning as positively beneficial:

"You can, you know, tune into the parts where you need to work on rather than having to look at the whole of the picture all of the time." (Case Study A: Student respondent 1)

▶The competence-based approach was seen by Case Study A and C programme personnel and practice teacher respondents and by Case Study B practice teacher respondents as fairly centrally to do with assessment and with standards - more so than as an approach to teaching and learning. For instance:

"When I think about core competencies, I automatically think about assessment more than I do around teaching and reflection and things." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"We have to have a way of knowing if students are capable of these aspects of social work." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"The practice requirements are the only thing we've got to assess them [students] with. If we didn't have them the only way we could say if a student was ready to pass or not would be if they'd really fouled up somewhere or if we could imagine working with them in the same team." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

And perhaps as a way of demonstrating 'fitness to practice' to employers:

"Even if it seems laborious, it's very reassuring from an employment perspective to know that students have been assessed as fit to practice through it." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"It is about putting a number of elements together to ensure fitness for practice." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

▶Flowing from this, the competence-based approach was very much seen as associated with and emphasising the notion of evidence and of evidence-based assessment by Case Study A and B programme personnel and practice teacher respondents and by all Case Study C respondent groups:

"A list of competencies: looking for evidence that would support those competencies absolutely." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"It means to me that students are able to provide information, to provide a selection of accounts of their practice – set against a set of clearly specified criteria." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"We have to provide evidence, you know, in writing or be observed so our practice teachers know we're up to it." (Case Study C: Student respondent 2)

▶Notwithstanding the objective assessment approach implied by these responses, no respondents from any of the three case studies articulated a perception of the competence-based approach as in any way empowering or enabling of students in terms of the power relations between learners and their teachers/assessors.

▶What was suggested, however, by student and practice teacher respondents from each case study was that this emphasis upon the production of evidence may lead to learning being undertaken primarily to evidence required areas of competence rather than in response to a student's particular developmental needs or interests, or simply for its own sake:

"I feel it is a little bit like jumping through hoops; that you have to meet certain criteria and prove you can do certain things and I also think we possibly design our work, or arrange our work, around that sometimes .... Sometimes you have to sort of contrive to meet your competencies." (Case Study A: Student respondent 2)

"Not so much at the beginning probably but as you go on you end up having to fit what you think of for them [students] to do, with the practice requirements they've got left to cover." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"You do have to be looking out all the time for if what you're doing meets the competences and if it doesn't it seems like a bit of an indulgence." (Case Study C: Student respondent 1)

▶One Case Study C practice teacher respondent commented on the time-specific nature of the DipSW framework of competences and noted:

"When you think about it, it's only about how we see social work now, under the DipSW, and that has probably evolved already and will change again." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

• Understandings and Illustrations of Reflective Learning:

▶Reflective learning was understood across each of the three respondent groups within each of the three case studies as an analytical and critical approach:

"Rather than, sort of, meeting criteria, it is analyzing .... and identifying why we do that, what is the outcome of this etc." (Case Study A: Student respondent 2)

"It is not enough to say you can communicate well because a service user opened up and talked to you about, maybe, painful things. I want students to be able to know – and tell me – why they worked in the way they did, how they can improve, the consequences of not having chosen to work in a particular way – all that sort of thing." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"It would be an approach that encourages the learner to critically analyse their practice and then develop from that basis." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶These responses also show a connection being made across the three case studies and by respondents from each of the respondent groups between the reflective learning approach and the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students. Furthermore, respondents from each group and case study illustrated the use of reflective learning within their respective programmes by referring to the reflective written commentaries that form part of the student-produced practice learning portfolio[9].

▶A further finding common to each case study was that although many practice teacher respondents talked of their preference for and attempts to promote reflective learning in their work with students, neither students nor programme personnel cited supervisory and/or teaching and learning dialogue between student and practice teacher as a place where reflective learning takes place.

▶Within Case Study A the most frequently expressed example (by both student and programme personnel respondents) of the use of reflective learning within the context of

[9] A cumulative set of student-produced material and practice teacher feedback and comment, presented in the form of an individual portfolio, that was used by each programme to demonstrate the process and outcomes of each of the periods of agency-based practice learning for each student.

university-based teaching and learning was a communication skills module involving case studies and videoed practice simulation. One student and the agency-based member of programme personnel referred to a reflective practice module and one student and one programme personnel (university-based) respondent referred to a module on working with children and families, also involving the use of case studies and of role play. Practice teacher respondents said they had insufficient knowledge of university-based learning to comment.

Within Case Study B practice teacher respondents also referred to a specific practice learning-based based (and joint marked) essay that students complete as they near the end of the 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. Two of the four student respondents discussed reflective learning as a 'theme' running throughout university-based teaching and learning and one programme personnel respondent referred to classroom discussion as encouraging reflective learning. Student respondents and one programme personnel respondent mentioned a university-based module, which takes place before any agency-based practice learning, on 'preparing for practice learning'. All student and one university-based programme personnel respondents said that all essays explicitly require the demonstration of the reflective learning approach.

Within Case Study C, practice teacher respondents and the agency-based programme personnel respondent referred only to the agency-based practice learning context (and in terms of the reflective written commentaries) as illustrative of the use by this programme of the reflective learning approach. University-based programme personnel respondents described *'most'* essays as explicitly requiring the demonstration of *'reflection'*. Both student and university-based programme personnel respondents mentioned university-based classroom discussion and tutorial meetings as promoting reflection but did not refer to any specific modules/courses. Student respondents referred to reflective learning *"as a kind of constant stream"* (Student respondent 1) and as *"always there"* (Student respondent 3) throughout university-based teaching and learning within this programme but, again, did not provide particular examples of this in terms of modules/courses (or of teaching and learning strategies).

▶Reflective learning was understood as linked to – even synonymous with – reflective practice by student and practice teacher respondents from Case Studies A and B and by all respondent groups from Case Study C:

"The reflective learning approach would be more about assessing students' ability to reflect on their practice – to be reflective practitioners." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"I would think very much about reflective practice." (Case Study B: Student respondent 2)

"For me, this would be very much linked to reflective practice." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶Case Study A and C educator (i.e. programme personnel and practice teacher) respondents proposed reflective learning as indicative of an inductive approach to the use of knowledge. This was echoed by Case Study B programme personnel respondents and discussed in terms of a cyclical process by Case Study B students:

"It is looking for insights, gaining insights through practice." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"How have you responded/how would you respond? Let's put in another layer of what you now know from maybe a theoretical base. How does that affect your thinking? What hypotheses might you draw on now?" (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"When I think of reflective learning I think of the cycle in that you have perhaps a knowledge base which informs your practice and then from your practice you kind of sit back and think about what you have done and evaluate it and then that sort of informs you further." (Case Study B: Student respondent 4)

"We would want to encourage students to learn from practice, not just in experiential terms but as well in terms of deriving knowledge from practice." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶Reflective learning was seen as a more active and learner-centred approach to learning and development by educator respondents from each of the three case studies.

"I feel like I am just facilitating, just holding the learning rather than being directive and trying to pull things out of the student." in contrast with the competence-based approach which resulted in "a more passive recipient" of learning. (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"Ideally, I like to see students coming to supervision having thought for themselves what is most important for them to look at." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"I like anything reflective that gets them [students] thinking for themselves and having more enquiring minds really." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

▶Reflective learning was understood as embodying the conscious management and use of personal feelings on the part of the learner and, flowing from this, as incorporating self awareness and perhaps use of previous experience by one Case Study A practice teacher respondent and by programme personnel from Case Studies B and C:

"...to kind of access feelings around what they [students] are doing – their own feelings, to reflect on those." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"Understanding how your previous experiences, just the way you appear to families, and how that is influencing what you do and how they are responding to you is an important part of the process." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"Recognition of the part played by and the impact of self are so crucial. These are crucial messages for students, promoted by reflective learning as part of that process of self awareness." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶Case Study C only incorporated the view by some practice teacher and programme personnel respondents and by all student respondents that reflective learning embodies and enables anti-oppressive practice and ideas of criticism and challenge of existing arrangements:

"Students who are more reflective are usually the ones who want to question agency practice – why we do things the way we do – and to question what's going on. It can be stimulating." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"I think you have to reflect before you can practice anti oppressively." (Case Study C: Student respondent 2)

• Perceptions of Use within the Case Study Programmes:

▶Case Study B and C educator respondents commonly expressed the view that, whilst the competence-based approach may appear more in evidence in relation to agency-based practice learning, the reflective learning approach also characterizes these programme and thus that the two approaches are used throughout in a balanced manner:

"Competence in the sense of the six core competences is obviously important but it's only part of the picture. If we didn't also teach reflective learning we'd be turning out very ill equipped students." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"I think there is always the expectation that students demonstrate reflective learning as well as deal with the competences." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"It's the core competences, of course, that seem to get a higher profile but that doesn't mean that reflective work is neglected on this course – I don't think it is at all." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent)

▶Some Case Study A educator respondents also proposed balanced use:

"We are very well aware of both and try to keep them in balance." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I wouldn't see one being used more than the other." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

However, this view was not universally shared within Case Study A:

"If I think about the way we do the programme team meetings and the way we liaise with our agencies, we are quite outcome-focussed – I would say it [the emphasis within this programme] is probably competence." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"I think the competence-based side is more evident." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

▶Some Case Study B practice teacher respondents felt that the emphasis given to either - or a combination of – the two approaches depends upon the individual tutor:

"It does depend on which tutor you have come out and see you because tutors have their own likes and dislikes." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"I feel like I've been given different messages at different times by the university staff." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

▶Student respondents from each of the three case study programmes offered a variety of views as follows:

	Dual and balanced use of competence-based and reflective learning approaches	Greater emphasis placed upon competence-based learning	Greater emphasis placed upon reflective learning	Neither approach clearly in evidence/ Don't know
CASE STUDY A		2	1	1
CASE STUDY B	1	1	1	1
CASE STUDY C	1	2		

▶Agency-based programme personnel and practice teacher respondents from Case Studies B and C referred to a sense of tension between, if not the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, then certainly the preferences of the university and agency bases

"If practice teachers are left to their own devices they would like to see it as a competence-based model, but I think that their view is the college expects there to be due recognition of the theoretical base which then has to permeate the whole of the practice, so I think quite often I have heard practice teachers say 'well, you know, we have to please the tutor' or 'we have to make sure that the academic learning is in there otherwise the college will be unhappy with us' so you see there is a tension out on the patch potentially." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

"You're always aware, you know, as a practice teacher, that the reflective stuff is something the university is expecting to see." (Case study C: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"Probably on a day to day basis, practice teachers do have heightened awareness of the core competences – because these are what they must cover – but I think they do recognize that the

college won't just accept this and also need to see evidence of reflection." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

▶The issue of time, and in particular the relative brevity of the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning, was seen by some practice teacher respondents within Case Studies A and C as resulting in a prioritization of the competence-based approach since this was seen to enable the production by students and practice teachers of requisite evidence.

▶Case Study A students cited difficulty in managing the theory-practice relationship as a further explanation for the perceived prioritization of the competence-based approach. As one student respondent commented:

"The theory that they are teaching you; when you actually get out there [to agency-based practice learning], you know, things are not quite how they said they would be .... Theory just seems so far away from what you are actually doing. It is quite hard to link the two.. It makes it easier; having these certain competencies that you have to reach ... it makes it more logical." (Case Study A: Student respondent 1)

▶In comparison with other local social work qualifying programmes, Case Study B was perceived by practice teacher respondents as placing a greater emphasis upon the reflective learning approach:

"I prefer working with this course because they are really interested in reflection and not just bogged down in the competence framework the way they seem to be at XXXX. The difference shows in the students, it really does." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

▶The suggestion was made by Case Study B programme personnel and student respondents from Case Studies B and C that the competence-based approach is built on by a more advanced reflective learning approach:

"I think to begin with initially it was the competence based approach. It was very, very evident. But I think basically what we were trying to achieve is to build on a foundation from which you could start to build a framework from which to operate reflectively." (Case Study A: Student respondent 3)

"I would definitely say that we use the competences as a foundation and then build up to more of an expectation of reflective learning." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

►An experience that was articulated by educator respondents from each of the case studies was that a competence-based framework for education, perhaps because of its apparent wealth of accompanying procedures, language and requirements will dominate upon its introduction but, over time, will come to be used more flexibly and creatively and in conjunction with the reflective learning approach:

"I think there has been an evolution over time. I think initially the competence-based approach was quite overwhelming for practice teachers when we first started working with it. And I think, certainly I can't speak for other people, but I certainly felt I had to work very hard to get my head around how that worked and what it did and it is almost as if, over time, we have been able to recover more the kind of reflective processes and make the process less, if you like, restrictive and become more able to open up the sort of reflective side of the process." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"People were quite kind of stunned when the DipSW first came in and they were trying to get to grips with it – or avoid it which they couldn't do. Now it's more settled with everyone being calmer about what actually constitutes learning opportunities and evidence and there's more space to talk the language of reflection." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

• **Section b:** Whether competence-based and reflective learning approaches can be used alongside one another; illustrations of such dual and integrated use; what might facilitate their joint use; whether any perception of conflict between the two approaches exists

• Integrated Use of the Two Approaches:

►All three respondent groups within each case study agreed that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches can be used alongside one another and work together within social work education:

"I think they do work alongside each other." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"I would probably argue that you can't have one without the other. I think they both inform each other really" (Case Study B: Student respondent)

"The two approaches do need to be used in a dual kind of way if the whole education experience is going to have any meaning." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶However, within each case study the two approaches were perceived as distinct and were not seen as synonymous:

"The paradox is that both actually achieve something which each by itself doesn't." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"They are different, but equally important parts, of the whole, the business of teaching and learning about social work and assessing this." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"I would think of them as the opposite sides of the same coin." (Case study C: Student respondent 1)

▶Case Study B practice teachers proposed that using reflective learning alongside a competence-based approach requires the investment of more time by both students and practice teachers with the following observations:

"The thing is, you know that in practice they are not going to have the time to reflect all that much so you wonder if it's really fair to get them doing it as students – you know, when they've got so much more time to learn reflectively." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"I think that the amount of time that we as practice teachers need is actually the minimum you can possibly do the job in. I could not do it in 1.5 hours a fortnight or whatever there is supposed to be." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

• Illustrations of Integrated Use:

▶Case Study A: student and practice teacher respondents cited the need for the use of both approaches to be evident in the practice learning portfolio as illustrative of their dual use. The only programme personnel respondent to refer to this was the tutor with specific responsibility for agency-based practice learning. The agency-based programme personnel respondent mentioned the university-based student induction to/preparation for agency-based practice learning as an illustration of the two approaches being used and working together – but without specifying how this occurs.

One programme personnel respondent stated that this programme does not value in-depth appraisal of how practice learning outcomes are arrived at whilst another asserted that the

modules which she delivers both promote and require 'critical thinking' on the part of students.

A practice teacher respondent suggested the timetabling of the reflective practice module to take place immediately prior to agency-based practice learning indicated dual use of the two approaches and one student respondent referred to the university-based communication skills module as simultaneously embodying both the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches.

▶Case Study B: all respondents cited the need for the use of both approaches to be evident in the Practice Learning Portfolio. Three out of the five practice teacher respondents referred to their sense of responsibility to use both approaches in a balanced way in their work with students generally and the other two practice teacher respondents cited their management of student supervision and of direct observations as specific illustrations of where they feel they use both approaches. However, other than the Practice Learning Portfolios, neither student nor programme personnel respondents cited any aspects of agency-based practice learning (such as supervision) as illustrative of the simultaneous or combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within this programme. Instead, these respondents referred to university based seminars and small group teaching as examples of where this takes place – but without specifying how it occurs.

▶Case Study C: all respondents referred to the need for evidence of both approaches within the practice learning portfolio. Two out of the three practice teacher respondents said that they feel it is their responsibility to not only draw on both approaches but also to ensure that they balance their use of these respectively in their work with students. Furthermore, two out of the three practice teacher respondents cited student supervision during agency-based practice learning as an example of where such dual and balanced use occurs. Programme personnel and student respondents referred only to the practice learning portfolios, however, as illustrative of the combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the agency-based practice learning context.

In addition, student respondents mentioned seminars and other university-based teaching/learning opportunities such as structured small group discussions as examples of where they think dual use of the two approaches happens on this programme. However, student respondents gave these responses in relation to practice learning i.e. referred to university-based consideration of agency-based practice learning experiences. Only programme personnel (and only the university-based respondents) referred to learning other than agency-based practice learning and cited seminars, small group teaching and tutorials that emphasise personal and professional development as illustrative of the combined use by this programme of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

• Facilitating Joint Use:

▶Case Study A student respondents suggested: more explicit reference, in the course of university-based teaching, to the core competences used within the context of agency-based practice learning. Also, more university-based essays, requiring analysis but focusing on these core competences, which could be undertaken during, and in tandem with, the periods of agency-based practice learning.
These student recommendations appeared to relate to enhanced integration between university and agency-based learning and were echoed by a Case Study A practice teacher respondent whose suggestion was for improved communication between the university and practice learning agencies as to the content of university-based teaching.

▶One Case Study A university-based programme personnel respondent advocated a more central emphasis within university-based teaching upon formative assessment aimed at skills development and another proposed, perhaps similarly, increased use of classroom exercises aimed at stimulating thinking by students about their own identities.

▶Some Case Study B programme personnel respondents suggested a need for more clarity as to what is understood as each of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

▶Student and practice teacher respondents from each of Case Studies A, B and C proposed more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning and that these should involve more directly observed student practice learning.

▶Respondents from each group and from within each case study suggested that agency-based practice learning, particularly supervision, could be managed differently i.e. could promote reflection by students more and focus less on procedural matters. Practice teacher and programme personnel respondents generally agreed the need for changes to practice learning arrangements whereby students would be encouraged to be less preoccupied with the competence-based framework and requirements and to be more reflective in their engagement with their social work education.

• Perceptions as to Conflict between the Two Approaches:

▶Within Case Study A all programme personnel and most practice teacher respondents perceived contradiction – and even conflict – between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Such conflict was not explicitly stated within Case Studies B or C though potential tensions were proposed that echoed certain of the concerns expressed within Case Study A.

▶Possible conflict between the two approaches was illustrated by the concern that a student could potentially evidence all areas of competence and pass the period of agency-based practice learning, if not the whole programme, whilst having - or having shown - limited ability to reflect:

"My struggle sometimes is that they [students] have met the criteria for all the competences, but for me there is still that crucial element that is missing." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"I definitely think that the competence-based stuff invites students to just, well, describe what they're doing rather than really show that they've been thinking about it. And then what can you do? Here is a student with all their evidence so it's hard to then say that that isn't enough." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

▶A tension for practice teachers between simultaneously enabling reflection and assessing competence was proposed because of student preoccupation with the competence framework by practice teachers from Case Studies A and C:

"I think some students come out thinking about this Portfolio – they have got to get this Portfolio [of evidence of required competences] complete and that is the focus." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 1

"It's understandable when you think about it, but it is a tough challenge for practice teachers when they get students who are very focused on what they've got to do as requirements and then the whole placement experience gets constructed around these and there is less interest in, attention for reflection – because it's not seen as a requirement in the same way." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

▶For Case Study A agency-based programme personnel and practice teacher respondents, there was a potential for tension between breaking social work practice down into distinct areas (or elements of competence) on the one hand and a holistic (and more reflective) approach on the other:

"I think you can lose sight of the whole." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"One of the things I don't like about the competence-based [approach] is about fitting practice into the core requirements whereas with reflection it is about looking at things as a whole rather than breaking them down." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

▶Case Study A and C educator respondents emphasized the importance of balanced use of the two approaches and suggested conflict as likely to arise where imbalance occurs For instance, the following story of an applicant's interview for a place on the programme was recounted. The applicant had:

".... A huge file of certificates from the NVQ module about how you should do this and you shouldn't do that .... she successfully kind of jumped through the hoops .... But she almost stereotyped, really, the kind of work expectancy of a competence-based approach .... What appears to emulate a reductionist approach in practice." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"It's a problem and then maybe a conflict, I think, if you've got lots of reflection going on which may all be interesting but where the student isn't actually evidencing the competences – and then the other way round too, I suppose." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

▶Similarly, Case Study B student respondents emphasized the significance of balanced use of the two approaches:

"You need your tutor or practice teacher to be reminding you they're both there, not just focusing on one or the other – letting you think that being technically competent or a really deep reflector is enough on its own, because it's not." (Case Study B: Student respondent 2)

▶For Case Study B and C programme personnel, there was a concern that the reflective learning approach they saw as used within the university may not be given equal emphasis within agency-based practice learning:

"Whilst we would advocate that it [reflective learning] should be the essence of social work training, we can't always guarantee that it is part of their [students'] experience on placement." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I would see one possibility for problems lying with different prioritizing between college and placement. I mean you've always got to make sure that it's not competence being emphasized in the agency and reflection in the college." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

▶A further concern – or source of potential contradiction between the two approaches – raised by a Case Study A programme personnel respondent was in terms of time:

"When they [students] are out in practice they are not given the time to reflect and the time to think clearly, you know. You need space to do so, so that is a kind of contradiction in this and where the two don't meet." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

▶Notwithstanding certain expressed reservations, no Case Study B or C respondents, from any of the three respondent groups, perceived contradiction or conflict between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches to the same extent as their Case Study A counterparts:

"Of course they are not in conflict. How can they be when the two things: competence and reflection are what add up to effective social work?" (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

▶And although some student respondents articulated provisos that mirrored some of those expressed by educator respondents, their overall perception was that there is not necessarily conflict between competence-based and reflective learning:

"They do go hand in hand and you couldn't do one without the other." (Case Study A: Student respondent 1

"I don't think there was any point on the course where I felt, well these things are contradictory or in conflict." (Case Study B: Student respondent 2)

• **Section c:** Practice Learning: whether evidence of both approaches is needed to pass practice learning; whether either approach is emphasised within university-based preparation for practice learning or written guidance; perceptions of practice teachers as to student preferences:

• Evidence Needed to Pass Practice Learning:

▶All three Case Study A respondent groups and educator respondents from Case studies B and C agreed that student evidence of agency-based practice learning linked to core competences only is insufficient for a student to achieve a pass mark in relation to periods of agency-based practice learning.

Further, practice teacher and programme personnel respondents agreed that the practice learning portfolio that is produced by a student and practice teacher and in which the practice learning that has been engaged with is outlined and illustrated, should demonstrate the student's reflective capacity as well as evidence of the required:

"If I had a student that was really good, like at bringing me evidence, identifying the practice requirements and putting the Portfolio together, but wasn't very strong on reflective learning then I would be really, really concerned." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"They can have every box ticked but there is still something underlying which remains." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

"I would be very unhappy about passing a student who has produced a really descriptive Portfolio, no matter how neatly each of the practice requirements may seem to have been covered by the work they discuss." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

▶This position was expanded upon through the perception (again expressed by all Case Study A respondent groups and Case Study B and C educators) that a requirement for reflection is inherent in the way that competence is demonstrated and evidenced:

"You have to show that you are competent and everything that you do has to be reflected upon so they are both there, you can't do one without the other." (Case Study A: Student respondent 1)

"The reflective learning is integrated into the practice and it is one big parcel if you like." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"To show true competence, the reflective thinking that the student has done, both before and after the event, has to be there." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶However, an apparent contradiction emerged between what some programme personnel respondents (from each case study) felt should happen and their stated experience of the assessment of agency-based practice learning by students:

"If I am honest, I can think of Portfolios I have read where there really wasn't much more there than descriptions of practice mapped against the practice requirements. It's not ideal but it's what we sometimes get. And we certainly wouldn't necessarily fail those students." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"At the end of the day if a student has got all the practice requirements evidenced and it's not too basic, you know, they've shown that they have been thinking about what they're doing, that's probably enough." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

▶Case Study B and C student respondents also articulated unease that reflective learning is not prioritized in the assessment of student performance to the same extent as the competence-based approach:

"Whether you would fail because you hadn't been particularly reflective in your practice analyses, I don't know really." and "I think there is an emphasis on the competences." (Case Study B: Student respondent 1)

"I think a lot of the time, even though reflection gets talked about, it's the evidence of competence that really counts. After all, that's what you must have." (Case Study C: Student respondent 2)

►A suggestion, by both practice teacher and a student respondents from Case Studies A, B and C was made that evidence of competence only is enough in the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning, but that evidence of reflective learning also is required in the second (80-day) and final period.

►However, programme personnel respondents from each case study were unanimous in the view that a clear and significant reason for student failure of agency-based practice learning is inadequate evidence of reflection:

"The student is perfectly capable of following procedures: there were no contrary indicators about the practice being anything other than fine. But there is not evidence in the placement Portfolio to evidence or suggest this student is able to reflect. So more work is being done." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, 4)

"Probably the main reason for failure, after the obvious cases of dangerous or damaging practice, would be that the Portfolio simply does not demonstrate reflection by the student." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

►Nonetheless a Case Study C practice teacher respondent referred to the absence of a clear and shared structure for assessing reflective learning in the following terms:

"It would be better, much easier for students and practice teachers, if we had a framework for reflection like we have for the practice requirements. That's so useful in making sure you're covering what you're supposed to but when it comes to reflection – that's different things to different people." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

• Emphases Within Preparation for Practice Learning and Written Guidance:

►In the same way that student respondents had differing perceptions as to which, if either, approach is primarily in evidence on this programme, student responses, from Case Studies A and C, as to whether the university-based preparation for agency-based practice learning emphasizes both approaches more or less equally, or one more than the other, were at variance:

"There is an element of reflective [learning] in there but I don't really feel that has sort of been pushed through. It is more about meeting the competences." (Case Study A: Student respondent 2)

"Thinking about it, they probably encouraged our, you know, reflective work." (Case Study A: Student respondent 3)

"I would say it's competence that really gets pushed." (Case Study C: Student respondent 2)

"I think a lot of people got quite, you know, almost frozen by it, by the whole framework. And we often seemed to get bogged down by people worrying about whether they could do it all. But I do think there was a definite message that we couldn't just go out there and say 'I've done this and I've done that so that's my competences met then'. We were definitely being told that there is more to it than that." (Case Study C: Student respondent 1

▶In line with their expressed sense that the assessment of agency-based practice learning is dominated by the competence-based approach, three out of the four Case Study B student respondents said they feel that the university-based preparation for this also emphasizes the competence-based approach:

"I think there is a big emphasis on the core competences there because, you know, you are given the matrix and shown that and you are given guidance and people get very hung up on it – you sort of think 'how on earth can I do that?' .... The fact that you have to evidence each one at least once seems to be the bench mark really." (Case Study B: Student respondent 1)

▶Although practice teacher respondents from each of the case studies felt unsure and said they were unaware of the precise content and process of the pre agency-based practice learning preparation of students, all programme personnel respondents were of the view that, in the course of this preparation, reflection is emphasised alongside demonstration of competence:

"It [the competence based framework] is not a preoccupation. It's interesting because I get involved in delivering these pre-placement things and I think it is very clear in my talk that it is about good practice and reflection and competencies." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"I would hope that they [students] are understanding that the placements are not just about the practice requirements and getting those ticked off but are also about so much more. And we do emphasise, I think that to be competent they have to develop their capacity for reflection." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

▶Three Case Study A practice teacher respondents said they felt both competence-based and reflective learning are emphasised in their programme's written guidance regarding periods of practice learning. This was illustrated through reference to the guidance

containing information both about the competence framework and about student-produced reflective commentaries. However, while one practice teacher respondent felt that the reflective learning approach receives greater emphasis and gave examples of this in terms of the information provided regarding direct observations of student practice learning and, again, student-produced reflective commentaries, the remaining practice teacher respondent said that she felt neither approach was emphasised or made particularly clear.

Two of the five Case Study B practice teacher respondents identified a clear emphasis within this programme's written guidance regarding agency-based practice learning (and this was upon a competence-based approach) with the remaining three perceiving both or neither of the two approaches being particularly emphasised. No practice teacher respondents offered any specific illustrations from the guidance in support of their views.

Although each of the three Case Study C practice teacher respondents expressed the view that the programme's written guidance regarding agency-based practice learning draws upon and emphasises both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches in equal measure, none of these respondents offered specific illustration as to where this is demonstrated.

• Practice Teacher Perceptions of Student Preferences:

▶Case Study A practice teacher respondents said that programme students tend to demonstrate a clear preference for either the competence-based or the reflective learning approaches:

"Some students are very much in favour of the competence base because it is kind of clear and tight isn't it? And they find the reflective learning quite difficult and more challenging. Whereas other students have definitely found the competence side as almost like a weight to drag with you when they are inspired and flowing and want to be onwards and learning." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

The majority of both Case Study B and C practice teacher respondents perceived the competence-based approach as uppermost in student thinking in the sense that students have seemed keen to see their evidence 'grids' filled in.

"It may not be that it [a competence-based approach] is emphasised but they [students] know the word and they will talk about the matrix – you have a real difficulty in saying to them 'there is a piece of work that doesn't fit into your matrix but I want you to do it.' Students are so focused on completing this tick boxing and I hear more and more 'but that doesn't fit into my matrix' or 'what I need is some clients who can help me ...' so a client becomes a vehicle for the student." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

But two out of the five Case Study B practice teacher respondents felt that their experience of students from this programme suggested a reflective learning emphasis:

"They [students] definitely do understand the importance of learning through reflection so I guess there must have been that kind of input from the college. I would say they are not so concerned about the competence-based bit as they are to show they are reflective." (Case study B: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

▶Practice teacher respondents throughout the three case studies agreed that more able students manage the competence-based requirements more reflectively while less able students focus upon and become preoccupied by these. All practice teachers felt that the reflective learning approach is more suitable to, or likely to receive more emphasis during, the second 80-day period of agency-based practice learning and within Case Study B three practice teachers suggested that reflective learning is something that is worked towards – or up to – by students.

• **Section d**: Perceptions of Use of Competence-based and Reflective Learning within University-based Teaching and Assessment:

• University-based Teaching and Learning:

▶All student and programme personnel respondents from each of Case Studies A, B and C said that the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches have been used jointly throughout university-based taught modules. No specific examples of such dual and integrated use were offered by respondents from Case Studies A and C. However, both identified a module on Social Work with Children and Families as embodying a more clear emphasis upon reflective learning (though a Case Study A programme

personnel respondent also commented that the Social Work with Children and Families module also makes explicit links with specific areas of competence). A further module focusing on Social Work Skills was cited as illustrative of a reflective learning emphasis within Case Study A.

Within Case Study B, a module focusing on Social Work with Children and Families was also cited as embodying a more clear emphasis upon reflective learning as were specific classes focusing upon Evaluation and upon Reflection. A modular sequence entitled 'Core Competences' that spans both years of this programme was proposed by student respondents as a particular example of university teaching and learning where combined use of the two approaches is evident. Student respondents noted, however, that such combined use of both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches was more readily discernable in Year Two teaching. Year Two teaching on Mental Health was cited, again by student respondents, as an exception to this apparently general rule, however, and was perceived as very competence-based.

Case Study A and C agency-based respondents said that they did not feel they had sufficient knowledge about university-based teaching to comment. Whilst one of the two Case Study B agency-based programme personnel respondents asserted the joint use of the two approaches throughout the programme but did not offer any specific illustration of this, the other said they do not know about university-based teaching and so could not comment.

• University-based Assessment:

►Case Study A: student respondents said that university-based assessment tasks are mainly in the form of essays but that Law and Social Policy are assessed through examinations. One student respondent expressed the perception that, in her experience, essays relating primarily to social science issues are more 'fact-based' whilst those relating primarily to social work practice are more 'interpretive'. As well as referring to the essays and exams mentioned by student respondents, university-based programme personnel respondents said that assessment of university-based learning also takes place through group-based student presentations and analysis of videoed role play exercises

undertaken by students. The agency-based respondents said that they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment.

With regard the general guidance for the completion of assignments issued by this programme, the overall view from both student and programme personnel respondents was that this appears to adopt the competence-based approach in that assignments are broken down into a series of different elements or criteria, similar language to that of the practice learning core competences is used and knowledge rather than reflection is emphasised. Only one student and one programme personnel respondent felt that this general guidance embodies a combination of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. The agency-based respondents said that they do not know.

▶Case Study B: according to student and programme personnel respondents, university-based assessed work within this programme is mainly in the form of essays with Law being assessed by means of a 'seen' (take home) examination. The use of case studies within the assessment context was also cited by these respondents. Both student and programme personnel respondents distinguished between formative and summative assessments by referring to presentations, group work and videoed role play exercises as quasi-formal assessment events, but ones which are not 'marked'(one programme personnel respondent pointed out, however, that feedback on their performance in these events is available to individual students upon request).

One agency-based respondent felt able to answer this question by referring to essays as the main vehicle for university-based student assessment but others said they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment

In terms of this programme's general guidance for the completion of assignments, all programme personnel respondents (including those professing limited knowledge in this specific area) stated that this involves balanced integration of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, though with perhaps a slightly greater emphasis upon reflective learning. This was echoed by three out of the four student respondents but one student respondent felt that neither approach is explicitly evident within assignment guidance.

▶Case Study C: Both student and university-based programme personnel respondents said that university-based assessment tasks are mainly in the form of essays but that Law is assessed by means of an examination. Presentations by students, the use of case studies and the use of timed assignments (i.e. 'seen' exams) were also cited by both respondent groups as commonly used forms of university-based assessment. Agency-based respondents said they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment

The guidance issued by this programme in relation to the completion of assignments generally was described by both student and university-based programme personnel respondents as involving balanced integration of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches but with perhaps a slightly stronger emphasis upon reflective learning One student respondent said that this general assignment guidance embodies a constant expectation of a questioning and critical approach. Agency-based respondents said that they do not know about this aspect of this programme.

• **Section e**: Origins of Programme Use of Competence-based and Reflective Learning: whether the emphasis on the approaches is a conscious feature of the programme; how this has come about; whether this emphasis is made explicit:

• Programme Emphasis: Intended Outcome or Unintended Consequence?

▶Although Case Study A programme personnel respondent perceptions differed regarding which, if either, of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches is emphasised by this programme, all said that they saw the emphasis as a conscious feature of this programme's design. All Case Study B and C programme personnel respondents felt that their programmes consciously emphasise combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

• Origins of Programme Emphasis:

▶In terms of how such conscious emphasis (whatever this is seen as being) has come about, some Case Study A programme personnel respondents saw the university-agency partnership as significant to this aspect of the development of this programme:

"It comes from the realisation through the programme team meetings, through feedback from agencies, that there were gaps in the programme." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶This view was shared by Case Study C wherein all programme personnel respondents stressed the centrality and importance of meetings attended by representatives of both the university and agency partners. Examples referred to were this programme's Management Committee and Practice Assessment Panel meetings. All programme personnel respondents stressed the significance of relationships over time between university and agency-based staff as influential in determining the direction of the programme.

▶Within Case Study B there was less clarity as to how this programme's conscious emphasis has come about: neither agency-based programme personnel respondent felt they knew (despite both having been continuously involved with this programme since its inception).A similar lack of awareness as to how or why this programme has developed in the manner in which it is perceived featured in all programme personnel respondent comments. However, one university-based programme personnel respondent suggested that:

"There is enough autonomy for individuals, working with common material, to be able to develop whichever or both emphases they wish to." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

• Explicit or Implicit Nature of Programme Emphasis:

▶In line with their varying perceptions of programme emphasis (upon use of either or both of the competence-based or reflective learning approaches), Case Study A programme personnel respondents differed in whether they felt that the emphasis within this programme is made explicit. Similarly, responses to a question as to where, within programme documentation, explicit mention is made of this programme's chosen emphasis indicated no common agreement. Responses ranged from guidance on agency-based practice learning to information on admission processes and criteria.

▶The majority of Case Study B programme personnel respondents stated that this programme's apparently conscious emphasis is made clearly evident - is written down, for example. Illustration of where this can be found was confined to agency-based practice learning, however. For instance, all programme personnel respondents saw agency-based practice learning documentation and guidance and related discussion arenas such as this programme's Examinations Board and Practice Assessment Panel meetings as the vehicles for making this programme's chosen emphasis explicit:

"Well, it's certainly a culture which is reflected in all the practice assessment panels – and in all my associations within exam boards and things." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

▶All Case Study C programme personnel respondents stated that conscious and combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is an explicit feature of this programme. However, two out of the three respondents within this group illustrated this with reference to agency-based practice learning only rather than the programme as a whole. Although the remaining programme personnel respondent referred to this programme's handbook, no specific sections within this were cited as making explicit mention of this programme's emphasis.

• **Section f**: Perceived Connections between the Approaches and forms of Professional Identity: Whether particular types of professional identity are associated with either approach; whether partner agency employers are seen to prefer a particular form of professional identity:

• Competence-based and Reflective Learning and Professional Identity:

▶Responses from each of the respondent groups and each of the case studies indicated the perception of very different professional identity characteristics arising from the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches respectively:

"Exclusively competence framework trained social workers will offer a very efficient administrative service for service users. They are very good on their procedures, applying care knowledge and various other bureaucratic processes but will have very little sense of the holistic professional art, if you like, of social work." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I suspect the competency based approach leads to a more technically focused kind of practice, the idea of social work as a set of quite technical tasks that maybe can be learned in a technical way and that you can just demonstrate ... whereas reflective learning encourages more thoughtful and more flexible practice that accesses different theories and knowledge bases." (Case Study B: Student respondent 2)

"I think of a highly competence-focused practitioner as being just a kind of functionary really; someone who is very good at knowing and using procedures but without much else to them." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

▶Again, responses from across the respondent groups and case study programmes suggested that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work education and practice is seen as inadequate and even dangerous for service users:

"We are talking about someone's life here. You don't put it in a tick box, you know. And to me if you go down just the competence-based route you are in danger of doing that. The process becomes the means to the end, not the need of the client, the service user or whatever you want to call them." (Case Study A: Student respondent 3)

"It's too tick box. That isn't what my profession is like. It's just not enough and it would be dangerous, I think." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

▶Practice teacher respondents from Case Studies A and B expressed the view that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work education and practice is also potentially dangerous for the worker them self:

"They may be making the same mistakes every time. They won't be learning from what they are doing, they won't be developing and, ultimately, they will burn out very quickly and probably very soon." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"They wouldn't survive would they? If anybody thinks you can survive social work, just on the basis of competence, they are going to be burnt out within the first two years." (Case Study B: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

▶A Case Study A university-based programme personnel respondent questioned whether a wholly or predominantly competence-based educated practitioner can be considered a professional, Case Study B programme personnel respondents stated that reflective learning-educated practitioners would have and use a more in-depth knowledge base – and that this is indicative of professionalism and Case Study C practice teacher respondents appeared to associate competence-based education with more basic, or foundational, levels of social work practice as follows:

"Exclusively competence framework trained social workers ..... will have very little sense of the holistic professional art, if you like, of social work. So I wouldn't consider them to be professionals." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"Let's face it, we all know social workers who are practically efficient and effective, know the available local resources etc. but who probably haven't looked at a piece of research or read a book since they were students. They know the ropes and how to use them but their practice just isn't knowledge-based. And I wouldn't say then that it's professional practice." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"Well, it only takes you so far, doesn't it, the competence-based approach, and if students depend on that stuff entirely, their practice when they qualify is likely to not be very skilled or sophisticated." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

▶All Case Study B and C respondent groups and Case Study A practice teacher and programme personnel respondents suggested that a predominantly competence-based social work education may give rise to social work practitioners who are more compliant/less challenging whilst more emphasis upon reflective learning could result in

a more critical and assertive practitioner. A predominantly competence-based educated practitioner was described as:

".... making sure that the team they are in like them, that the team managers are pleased that they are taking on the work .... and they are not challenging – you know, compliance." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"....someone who is happy to work within the groove that's been carved out, you know, and not to want to be concerned with – or have any responsibility for – developments and change for the better." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"If we went purely competence-based we would actually be missing something about, you know, the real importance of being able to think more critically about social work and to challenge on that basis." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

►Again, across the three case studies respondents from each of the respondent groups proposed that more emphasis upon reflective learning could result in a more critical/assertive practitioner. And that reflective learning gives rise to practitioners who are more aware of and questioning of ethics and their own value bases:

".... somebody who doesn't just take things at face value all the time, you know. Probably the one in the meeting who is the pain in the backside to the rest of the team." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"I think people who come from a reflective learning approach tend to be people who perhaps are more politicized, perhaps who have a kind of stronger emphasis on empowerment and take a wider view of social work and the role of social work in society and so on." (Case Study B: Student respondent 4)

"The student who is a reflective learner is more likely to develop into a practitioner who questions their own values and the baggage they bring to the job as a human being and examine these aspects of themselves." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

►A Case Study A student respondent expressed the perception that the reflective learning approach could promote a more independent thinking practitioner – and considered her own experience of this programme as follows:

"I suppose the competence-based practitioner would be the sort of person that goes by the book and does things in a sort of logical, proceduralist, imposed order whereas perhaps a reflective learner would be somebody that is a bit more independent perhaps. And I suppose that is the person I always wanted to be but I think perhaps that I have been pushed into that sort of logical proceduralism because that is what I have learned, you know." (Case Study A: Student respondent 2)

▶Whereas almost all Case Study C respondents made a strong connection between reflective learning and 'reflection' in practice:

"It's hard, you know, because reflection gets talked about a lot but it seems really hard to define – and not everyone seems to understand it in the same way. So, if you've done a lot on reflective learning on the course, you're likely to be better at reflection when you qualify I would think." (Case Study C: Student respondent 3)

"Requiring reflective learning of students is clearly very important in their becoming reflective practitioners who understand and value the place of reflection in social work." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶However, reservations about social work education and practice based wholly or predominantly upon the reflective learning approach were also expressed within Case Studies A and C:

"Somebody who is deeply into reflective learning – as a student or as a practitioner – would probably not get very much work done." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"Someone who trains entirely within a reflective learning ethos is likely to find themselves only comfortable within a kind of therapeutic environment where they are working at a relatively un-pressured pace with time for reflection and large amounts of professional discretion." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I think if you've got someone who's been heavily into reflective learning and they take that with them into practice and carry it on then they are probably going to be quite dependent on the rest of the team to be supporting them in learning the systems and procedures they need to know. I've worked with someone before who was like that." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 3)

▶Within Case Study A, balanced use of the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches, leading to a practitioner embodying professional identity traits characteristic of both approaches was expressed as an ideal by programme personnel respondents:

"That would be best – if you could dovetail the reflection and the competence." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"What I wouldn't want is just, kind of, administrators being produced. Nor would I want the therapist being produced. People need our social workers to be able to effectively work in both realms." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

▶Programme personnel respondents were asked where or by whom the outcome of their programme is decided upon in terms of the type of practitioner it educates for/prepares. All Case Study A university-based respondents and Case Study B programme personnel described the university and partner agencies as working closely together to ensure consensus on this question. The Case Study A agency-based programme personnel respondent and all Case Study C programme personnel said that their programmes act on feedback from, and seek to meet the needs of, local employers.

• Employer Preferences:

▶Practice teacher respondents from each case study were asked what kind of practitioner they think local/partner employers prefer: three out of five (Case Study A), two out of five (Case Study B) and two out of three (Case Study C) said that they think this is a more competence-based educated practitioner. One out of five (Case Study A) said that in their view local employers prefer a more reflective learning educated practitioner and one out of five (Case Study A) said that the requirements of a particular post/vacancy would dictate preference. All others (Case Studies B and C) said that local employers look for a rounded practitioner, combining both types of educational experience and related sense of professional identity.

▶Practice teacher responses regarding the influence, if any, that their sense of local employer preference has upon their approach to practice teaching varied by case study though common themes were also evident:
Case Study A - Responses were varied in that one practice teacher respondent said that students need time to engage with reflective thinking - and that a practice teacher can ensure this is available, whilst another said that students need to understand the limited time available within the workplace for reflective thinking – and that a practice teacher can ensure this by limiting the availability of such time. All respondents asserted their belief that the reflective learning approach is important, though one qualified this by stating that, whilst important, reflective learning is not essential.

Case Study B - All practice teacher respondents stated their belief that exposure to the reflective learning approach is important for all students notwithstanding the preferences of local employers ultimately. However, differing perceptions were also expressed in that for some respondents it was important to support students within their agency-based practice learning by ensuring they have the time and space seen as needed for reflective learning whilst by others it was seen as necessary to prepare students for limited workplace opportunities for reflective thinking and development by accordingly limiting the availability of time and space during the course of agency-based practice learning.

Case Study C - Although all practice teacher respondents said they see reflective learning as important, only one perceived it as essential within social work education. Further, one practice teacher respondent said that students need time to engage with reflective thinking - and that a practice teacher can ensure this is available, whilst another said that students need to understand the limited time available within the workplace for reflective thinking – and that a practice teacher can ensure this by limiting the availability of such time.

• **Section g**: Looking Ahead: the New Social Work Degree: Extent of Involvement in Programme Planning for the New Social work Degree; Preferences as to Use of Approaches Within the New Social Work Degree:

• Planning for the New Degree:

▶All Case Study A programme personnel and four out of the five practice teacher respondents said that they have been involved with and had an opportunity to contribute to the planning by this programme for the introduction of the new social work degree. Of the four practice teacher respondents who had had involvement, three perceived the programme planning for the new programme as emphasising the competence-based approach, though one qualified this by noting the view that there is perhaps potential, within the planning process, for strengthening the use and place of the reflective learning approach within the new programme

▶One practice teacher respondent felt unsure as to a discernible emphasis in terms of either the competence-based or reflective learning approaches. three out of the four programme personnel respondents asserted that the reflective learning approach is central to the preparatory thinking and planning for the new programme. One felt that it is not and said:

"I think there is still the emphasis upon producing a programme that has the practitioner running ready for practice in the real world so that will mean, you know, we have to underplay some of the reflective stuff because that isn't the language that the directors sitting at those meetings want to hear." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

▶Of the four programme personnel and five Case Study B practice teacher respondents asked about their involvement to date with the planning by this programme for the new social work degree, only one practice teacher respondent reported any involvement – and this had taken place at a regional rather than a programme-specific level. This respondents' sense at this point was that, at a regional level, planning seems to embody a predominantly competence-based emphasis.

▶Each of the three Case Study C programme personnel and two out of the three practice teacher respondents said that they have had involvement in the planning by this programme for the introduction of the new social work degree. All of these respondents expressed the view that this planning has involved a stronger emphasis upon reflective learning:

"I've been around a long time now, you know? And I was part of the DipSW being introduced so it does feel like I've been here before. But I think the difference this time has been that we have no longer been concerned with a whole raft of competences and how to accommodate these. Because after the DipSW experience we know how to do that. Now we have been able to think more about reflective practice and I would say that is what we have done." (Case Study C: Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

• Preferences as to Use of Competence-based and Reflective Learning Within the New Social Work Degree:

▶The need for a combination of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, but with more emphasis than currently upon reflective learning was expressed across the three respondent groups and throughout each of the three case studies:

"I think when students are thinking about their practice to have that competence framework to look at what they are actually doing and how they are working is really useful, it kind of spells social work out in a way. But I would like to see stress on the reflective learner and the responsibility for an individual social worker to be developing their own learning through that reflective process." (Case Study A: Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"Maybe it's because I'm so used to how things are now and I'm struggling to imagine something very different – but I really can't see how we can properly train and educate social workers without using both models." (Case Study B: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

▶Maintenance of the competence-based approach was viewed as important alongside the perceived need for more emphasis upon the reflective learning approach within the new programme throughout the case studies:

"I wouldn't say that I would like to see a complete end to a competence-based approach because I do believe that is a useful checklist almost for what students need to learn about. But I would like to see more discretion for students and practice teachers. And for me to be able to assess more a student's reflective ability alongside their ability to do the job competently." (Case Study C: Practice Teacher respondent 2)

▶In addition both Case Study B and C student and practice teacher respondents stated the need for more agency-based practice-based learning, with student respondents citing this as an effective means of drawing together the two approaches.

▶However, concern that the requirements of the new social work degree may impose the introduction of new and more complex competence-based frameworks was also expressed:

"I am also frustrated because the government has changed the rules again and introduced yet more complex kinds of competence frameworks because the way I see a competence framework is rather like a fence around a child's playground. What that does is to provide a protective framework that says: this is where the boundary is, these are the staging posts – the anchors if you like which define social work professional activity. Within that you have to make it up through reflective learning processes – processes that are more imaginative, more creative and that is the heart of what we need to be allowed to teach and students need to learn." (Case Study A: Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Summary:

In summary, these case studies have considered the perceived relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches to social work education with reference to: a four-year full time BSc (Hons) Social Policy and Social work/DipSW programme (Case Study A); a two-year full time DipSW/MA in Social Work programme (Case Study B) and a two-year full time DipSW programme (Case Study C). For background understanding, these programmes have been explored through reference to course documents, discussion with key informants and observation of group tutorial meetings. Data has been drawn from individual interviews involving a range of final year student, practice teacher and programme personnel respondents.

The findings from the interviews have been organised and presented in terms of seven areas of enquiry, or Sections a.-g. These findings may be summarised as follows:

Section a. explored how competence-based and reflective learning approaches are interpreted, understood and illustrated and whether there was any sense of dominance by one or the other of these within each programme.

The findings across each of the case studies indicate that a competence-based approach was understood as immediately concerned with evidence-based assessment through a process of breaking down the role and tasks of social work into a series of specific elements. However, the majority of Case Study B student respondents, together with some programme personnel, defined this approach more broadly and saw it as also

encompassing reflective activity, the use of theoretical and research-based knowledge and incorporation of values and ethics. For practice teacher respondents from each case study, this approach was predominantly associated with agency-based practice learning but for student and programme personnel respondents, the competence-based approach was also exemplified by the stated learning outcomes for certain university-based taught modules

A reflective learning approach was commonly understood as very much linked to reflective practice and as embodying personal self awareness and inductive use of knowledge. A common theme across the case studies was that while practice teacher respondents illustrated the use of reflective learning with reference to agency-based practice learning, students and programme personnel respondents pointed also to its place within the university-based domain of the programme.

Some Case Study A respondents perceived balanced use of the two approaches within this programme whilst others saw one or other (but particularly a competence-based approach) as more clearly in evidence. All Case Study B educator respondents asserted balanced use of the two approaches by this programme but student responses were more variable. It was suggested within Case Study B that different programme tutors favour use of the two approaches differently and that agency-based practice teachers emphasise a competence-based approach. (notwithstanding the positive expressions of interest in using a reflective learning approach that came from some practice teacher respondents).The overall view of Case Study C respondents was that this programme embodies balanced use of both approaches.

Section b. asked whether competence-based and reflective learning approaches can be used alongside one another and, if so, how such dual and integrated use is illustrated. How joint use of the two approaches may be better facilitated and whether any perception of conflict between the two approaches exists were further lines of enquiry within this section.

Although the two approaches were not seen as synonymous by any respondents, all throughout the case studies agreed that they can and should be used in conjunction (though disquiet was expressed by some Case Study B programme personnel respondents that practice teachers may allow a competence-based approach to dominate agency-based practice learning). The examples offered as to where, specifically, combined use of both approaches can be seen were: the Practice Learning Portfolios completed by students and practice teachers (all case studies); the preparation for agency-based practice learning undertaken with students (Case Study A); throughout the practice teaching undertaken with students (by practice teacher respondents from Case Studies B and C) and in university-based seminars and other small group teaching (by student and programme personnel respondents from Case Study B and by programme personnel from Case Study C).

Proposed strategies for facilitating the enhanced use of the two approaches alongside one another included greater integration between university and agency-based learning (Case Study A), more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning, also involving more direct observations of students, (all case studies), increased emphasis upon formative assessment and decreased preoccupation with prescribed competences (Case Study B) and supervision becoming a more reflective (as opposed to procedural) forum (all case studies).

While no case study student respondents saw contradiction or conflict between the two approaches, Case Study A educator respondents did express this view and illustrated it with specific concerns. For instance, a possible conflict between holistic versus fragmented thinking about social work was proposed. The potential for tension between the approaches was acknowledged within Case Studies B and C, though not such as to amount to conflict, and certain essential differences between the approaches seen as important to keep in mind.

Section c. considered agency-based practice learning specifically and asked whether evidence of both approaches is needed to pass practice learning, whether either approach

is emphasised within university-based preparation for practice learning or written guidance and for the perceptions of practice teachers as to student preferences.

Evidence of both student competence (mapped in accordance with competence requirements) and reflective capacity was seen as necessary for students to pass their periods of agency-based practice learning by practice teacher and programme personnel respondents from each of the case studies. Within Case Study A it was suggested that evidence of competence only is perhaps sufficient for the first of the two practice learning opportunities. Within Case Study B some programme personnel respondents expressed unease that, on occasion, predominantly competence-based evidence of student practice learning has been deemed sufficient to merit a pass in relation to either or both the 50 and 80-day practice learning opportunities. Within Case Study C practice teacher and student respondents indicated their view that evidence of reflective learning is not accorded as much priority – or value – as competence-based evidence (this was shared by Case Study B student respondents whose view also was that evidence of reflective learning is an ideal but not necessarily a requirement).

Programme personnel respondents from each case study described the university-based preparation for student practice learning as placing equal emphasis on each of the approaches but Case Study A and C student respondent views were mixed and most Case Study B student respondents described this preparation for practice learning as mainly characterised by a competence-based approach. Common to all the case studies was the finding that practice teacher respondents did not feel they had sufficient knowledge to comment. However, most Case Study A and C practice teachers stated that these programmes' written guidance for agency-based practice learning appeared to draw equally upon both approaches, though very limited illustration of this were offered. Case Study B practice teachers expressed more variable perceptions. The preference of students, in terms of an emphasis upon either of the approaches, was seen as mixed by Case Study A practice teachers and for use of competence-based learning by Case Study B and C practice teacher respondents.

Section d. explored respondent perceptions regarding the use of competence-based and reflective learning within university-based teaching and assessment.

Competence-based and reflective learning approaches were seen as used jointly throughout university-based modules by student and programme personnel respondents from each case study and some limited illustration was offered from within Case Study A and B though no examples from Case Study C were provided. A range of approaches to university-based assessment were reported throughout the case studies, though summative assessment appeared primarily to take the form of essays. Guidance and marking schedules for university-based assignments were commonly seen as requiring students to demonstrate both competence-based use of knowledge and of reflective learning. Indeed, Case Study B student respondents associated the demonstration of reflective learning with higher marks. Agency-based programme personnel and practice teacher respondents stated little or no knowledge of university-based teaching or assessment processes.

Section e. enquired as to the origins of programme use of competence-based and reflective learning in terms of whether the emphasis on the approaches is a conscious feature of programmes and how this has come about.

Within Case Studies A and C all programme personnel respondents maintained that the programme consciously emphasises its balanced use of both approaches and, further, that this has come about through a series of long-standing consultative relationships between university and agency personnel which have resulted in shared agreement on this issue. Where Case Study A respondents differed was in their views as to which approach (if either) was in fact emphasised, whether this was made explicit by the programme or indeed where, within the programme documentation, any explicit reference to the programme's use of either or both approaches was made. While the overall view of Case Study B programme personnel respondents was that this programme is conscious in its combined use of the two approaches, none felt able to say how this had come about. Most saw the programme's use of both approaches as an explicit feature but illustration of

where (e.g. within programme documentation) this can be seen was confined to guidance relating to agency-based practice learning (as was the case within Case Study C).

Section f. discussed whether particular types of professional identity are associated by respondents with either competence-based or reflective learning and whether partner agency employers are seen to prefer a particular form of professional identity. Fundamentally differing professional identities in emerging newly qualified social work practitioners were seen by all respondent groups from within each case study as arising from sole or predominant use of either a competence-based or a reflective learning approach within pre-qualifying education and training. A competence-based approach was associated with a focus on action and an emphasis on procedures and clarity as to these but also a risk of failure to recognise service users' individuality. A professional identity rooted in a mainly competence-based educational experience was seen as entailing compliance and also as more appropriate to a beginning (that is, newly qualified) level of practice expertise. Whereas a reflective learning approach was perceived as leading to a more critical, questioning, reflective and possibly politicised practitioner who would be more ready to examine their value base but who might, however, be less procedurally informed and efficient. Thus neither approach – nor the professional identity characteristics arising – in an extreme form was viewed as desirable and a more balanced outcome was seen as the programme goal.

Programme personnel respondents from each of the case studies reported close consultation between university and agency bases with the aim of ensuring agreement as to the programme outcome. However, while all Case Study A and C practice teacher respondents expressed a belief in the importance of reflective learning during pre-qualifying education and training, the majority felt that employer preferences are for more competence-based educated practitioners and thus that reflective learning is a desirable but not necessarily essential element of social work education. Some Case Study B practice teacher respondents stated that employers look for a balanced mixture of technical competence and reflective capacity within practitioner professional identity whilst others believed employers to prefer more competence-based characteristics.

Finally, **Section g.** looked at the planning being undertaken by each programme for the advent of the new social work degree.

Case Study A and C agency-based respondents commonly reported involvement with the planning and development process. Case study B agency involvement was far less though it sjould be noted that this was in a region of the UK where the degree was being introduced one year later than for Case Studies A and C. Respondents from each group and within each case study expressed the view that both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches need to feature within the new degree and in a balanced manner. Case Study A and B respondents identified the need for greater emphasis upon and clarity as to what constitutes reflective learning than presently. Case Study C respondents spoke of the need for a less tightly prescribed and more flexible framework of competences than currently that may thereby enable more space for the use of reflective learning.

Chapter Six: Understanding Competence-based and Reflective Learning

Introduction

The focus of this initial discussion chapter is the starting point of the enquiry: the understandings held by respondents of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively. The discussion considers each approach in turn and seeks to tease out and explore certain of the apparent implications of the perceptions expressed by respondents. The approaches were enquired into in neutral terms in that respondents were advised that neither 'right' nor indeed 'wrong' answers that offered definitions were necessarily relevant but, rather, that the imagery they held regarding each approach and the ideas they associated with each were what were being asked for. The chapter considers in turn a number of themes that were demonstrated as significant by the data. In relation to the competence-based approach; assessment, training and educational models of teaching and learning, the perceived merits and limitations of the approach, university-agency relations and interaction and the use of knowledge are discussed. Reflective learning is explored in terms of the mode of analytic thought that it is seen as embodying, an apparent conflation of reflective learning and reflective practice and the different forms of reflection that may underpin and inform respondent understanding of reflective learning.

Competence-based learning

Responses across both respondent groups and case study sites in relation to the competence-based approach indicated a high level of accord between respondents' perceptions and certain of the definitions and understandings proposed within the literature. For example, the approach was consistently discussed in terms of a break down of the social work role and tasks into a series of elements or units, each of which need to be demonstrated and assessed – performance criteria in other words (Eurat 1994, Doel

2000). Underpinning this was a clear sense of competence being understood as a specific standard of proficiency (Pierce and Weinstein 2000). Within Case Studies A and C, such proficiency appeared to be conceptualised in relatively technicist terms – as a kind of practical activity-based demonstration of the adequacy of a student's capacity in relation to the job of social work. This was despite the language of competency (as opposed to competence) sometimes being used by respondents, suggesting that, in people's minds at least, a distinction between the individual behavioural characteristics that facilitate or obstruct job performance, and the aspects or elements of the job itself, is not always clearly drawn (see Chapter Two: 'Origins and meanings of the competence-based approach'). Within Case Study B, however, student and programme personnel respondents articulated a broader understanding of the competence-based approach that incorporated knowledge, values and reflection as well as - and as informing - the technical skills emphasised by their counterparts in the other case studies. This understanding mirrored more closely the definition of competence adopted by the NCVQ (see Chapter Two: 'Origins and meanings of the competence-based approach') and it is interesting that it should be expressed within the only postgraduate case study setting, though not within those comprising undergraduate programmes.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning)

• Assessment and the competence-based approach:

A commonly expressed observation, certainly amongst educator respondents, was that the competence-based approach represents a method of assessment, more so than a vehicle for teaching and learning. Moreover, the competence-based approach was discussed as a means of facilitating, even ensuring, objective assessment of student progress through its reliance upon evidence as a central pivot. Thus assessment is believed to be based upon what is actually seen of and heard from students, and what is written by them, in concrete terms rather than the potentially more subjective perceptions of assessors. What was not articulated by respondents was any sense of misgiving that such evidence-based assessment is not perhaps as objective as may seem at first sight. After all, each piece of 'evidence' (e.g. an observed practice, a piece of written reflection, a supervision

discussion) is considered by assessors from the perspective of their individual lenses – and thus potential for bias is inevitable (Cowburn, Nelson and Williams 2000). A similar point is made by Lum (1999:414) who contends that assessment of competence is unavoidably 'observer-relative' and that 'a performance is only competent insofar as people regard it as such.' Yet there was no sense from respondents of a need for caution or for a more qualified approach to the use of a competence-based framework as a mechanism for assessment and this raises the possibility of the competence-based approach giving rise to misplaced confidence in its potential for enabling objective assessment. Perhaps this provides some explanation as to why it was that student respondents – who, after all, would be keenly aware of the possibility of their assessors appraising and judging their performance according to personally held standards – did not discuss the competence-based approach as a means of student empowerment (Mansfield and Mitchell 1996, O'Hagan 1996) within the context of the power imbalance between themselves and their assessors.

A further issue that is raised by the apparent faith of respondents in the capacity of the competence-based approach to minimise subjectively influenced assessment is the wisdom and efficacy of an approach rooted in uniformity and universal applicability. How objective can such a 'one size fits all' approach to assessment truly be? An illustration of the way in which this has been questioned comes from Kemshall (1993:42) (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches') who contends that the DipSW competences are in fact 'white competences' since they have been formulated by a white dominant elite and are thus disadvantageous of learners who are not of this background. Hence impartial objectivity on the basis of standardised requirements may become reconceptualised as subjective partiality arising from implicitly unfair and perhaps explicitly ill fitting expectations imposed in a uniform manner and demanded across learners without recognition of essential differences between them such as, for example, culture or gender. The clarity and transparency of a competence-based framework for assessment may, equally, be viewed as inflexible rigidity; as a cage within which some learners have more room for manoeuvre than others. Allied to this is the disclosure by students and practice teachers

across the three case studies that, during periods of agency-based practice learning, it is not unusual for specific experiences and pieces of practice to be sought out for students primarily because they provide the means for evidencing required competences and without regard for the interests of a student or their learning needs. So, not only do competence-based criteria become prioritised over the individual developmental needs and preferences of students but opportunities for learning also become subordinate to the process of evidencing a standardised set of requirements. In other words, it is the arrival and not the journey that matters.

A yet further dimension of the apparent perception of competence-based learning as free from subjectivity is the implication of this for culturally competent development and indeed for cultural competence in social work practice. Boyle (2001) points to a gap between the growing recognition throughout social work that sound practice can only be that which understands and is sensitive to social and cultural diversity and the operationalisation - in terms of specific areas of competence - of this recognition within pre-qualifying social work education. This is endorsed by Barker (1999) who maintains that social work education is key not only to promoting such cultural understanding and sensitivity but also to an appreciation by learners, and in turn by practitioners, of the strengths that are present in all cultures. What appears to be demonstrated by respondent perceptions of competence-based learning across the three case studies, however, is an absence of concern either that the DipSW competences fail to take account of cultural diversity as experienced by learners or educators, or that this carries the potential for an equal level of cultural 'blindness' in emergent practitioners.

At the heart of the discussion by respondents of the relationship between the competence-based approach and assessment lay the notion of standards – and 'fitness for practice' (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches') as the gold standard and ultimate goal of competence-based assessment. Again, the findings across the three case studies indicated a shared view that competence-based assessment provides a means of ensuring that students attain the desired professional standards for social work. However, an important critique of the

competence-based approach has been that it endorses teaching and learning - and subsequent performance - aimed at a standard that is no more than 'good enough' (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches'). Although no respondents explicitly raised this as an issue or concern, whilst defining competence-based learning, there was nonetheless an apparent perception throughout their responses of the pursuit and attainment of specific aspects of competence in terms of 'job and finish'. Thus learners may capture and bank their satisfactory demonstration of elements of competence and ongoing development in relation to these, with a view to excellence, need not necessarily be strived for. There is perhaps a sense then of limited aspirations associated with the competence-based model of teaching and learning and of acceptance by educators and learners alike of equally limited development by students. Such an association raises the possibility that a tacit message of 'good enough' may accompany use of a competence-based approach and that this may discourage and even obstruct ongoing professional development.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning)

- <u>The competence-based approach and teaching and learning processes: training or education?</u>

If, as indicated by respondents, the competence-based approach is understood primarily as a vehicle for assessment of learners by educators, then this begs an important question as to the teaching and learning processes that are used in enabling students to prepare for such assessment i.e. demonstrate satisfactory levels of ability. No respondents from any of the three case study programmes discussed specific pedagogical approaches within the context of the competence-based approach. Instead, a range of clear criteria as to what is required of students, together with the provision of opportunities (particularly within the sphere of agency-based practice learning) and instruction as to their use appear to comprise the teaching through which students may provide a response to competence-based assessment. This resonates with Dwyer's (1995) notion of 'factory education' wherein learning is through the provision of information in the form of fragmented pieces

and the responsibility for the assembly of these in to some kind of meaningful construct – or not - rests with the learner. Freire's 'banking concept of education' (1972:81) would also appear relevant. For Freire (1972), the relaying of information – on the basis of instruction – by a teacher to a learner as a receptacle for such information, risks the student's experience becoming one of surface learning only and of enabling reproduction of what has been learned but limited development of or from this.

A possible explanation for this absence of discussion of the teaching and learning processes associated with the competence-based approach is that respondents were conceptualising the approach as one of training, as opposed to education. If training can be understood as a person's acquisition of technical knowledge and specific, often directly practicable, skills but education (derived from the Latin *duco*: to lead out) as the unlocking of a person's capacity or potential to discover and assimilate knowledge in the form of principles and concepts for the purpose of enhanced understanding (Webb 1996), then a model or approach that is primarily one of training clearly has significant implications for learning outcomes in social work; it implies that social work practice may be taught, learned and assessed in technicist terms. The emphasis placed by respondents on the provision of practical opportunities for the rehearsal and demonstration of knowledge, imparted through instruction, as characterising the competence-based approach appears to suggest that it is essentially perceived as a method of training.

Moreover, the work of David Noble (1998) proposes a further distinction between training and education by suggesting that training is concerned with the development of knowledge and skills to be operationalised within a context, or for a purpose, that is determined by someone other than the learner. Education, on the other hand, is concerned with integration between learned knowledge and skills and the self thus giving rise to increased self-knowledge on the part of the learner. In this view, it is a hapless exercise to attempt to bring together training and education within a single and unified developmental process since the one militates against the other: training separates knowledge from the self whilst education positions them as inseparable. As indicated in

Chapter Two ('The competence-based and the reflective learning approaches and social work education'), preparation for qualified social work may be seen as having long been characterised by processes of both training and of education. However, whilst a concern with balancing, and increasingly with integrating, these evidently very different processes may be discernible within social work preparation, what is less apparent is the way in which their essential differences – even the inherent contradictions between the two – have been explicitly addressed. Thus to refer simply to 'social work education and training' (as, for example, in the very title of the DipSW awarding body, CCETSW) may be to attempt to wed inharmonious and oppositional approaches in what can only be an unhappy marriage leading inevitably to separation and divorce – in this case the separation of social work practice knowledge and skills to be exercised by the student without reference to self-knowledge from more conceptual and theoretical knowledge, the understanding of which is an inextricable part of the student.

Yet qualifying social work programmes are involved in an ongoing process of reconciliation as to this problematic relationship since preparation for social work comprises both technical or practical training and conceptual education. It would seem therefore that another way of asking 'what is the relationship between competence-based and reflective learning approaches within social work?' could be to ask 'what is the relationship between training and education within qualifying social work programmes?'

Although, as previously noted, the respondents from Case Study B proposed a wider, more inclusive interpretation of the competence-based approach than the more narrow and technicist definition put forward by Case Study A and C respondents, they discussed the teaching approach associated with competence-based learning similarly i.e. in terms of practical instruction and demonstration. However, a possible implication of this broader understanding as expressed by Case Study B student respondents seemed to be that they appeared comparatively less preoccupied than their peers from the other case studies with the notion of a grid or list of aspects to be evidenced by them. This is interesting not only because it belies any concern that students are necessarily drawn into a fragmented mode of thinking by an approach to learning and assessment that breaks

down the whole into a series of elements, but also because, again, it represents a difference between postgraduate and undergraduate programme respondents.

It would be surprising, however, if such differences between post graduate and undergraduate social work students were not discernible since the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (Annex 1, 2001) outlines clearly demarcated expectations of learners studying at diploma, degree and masters levels. For instance, a diploma level qualification holder is typically expected to be able to 'use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information' while the expectation of a degree level qualification holder is that they are able to 'apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding'. Masters level qualification holders, in contrast, are expected to be able to 'deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively' and to 'make sound judgements in the absence of complete data'. This demonstrates the expectation of a considerably more abstract and sophisticated approach by postgraduate learners and goes some way towards explaining differences in perception between the student respondent groups.

Programme personnel and student respondents from each case study illustrated their experience of the use of the competence-based approach with reference to university-based taught modules and assessment. For Case Studies A and C module learning outcomes and assignment requirements were referred to, indicating continued perception of the competence-based approach in terms of a breakdown of an overall task into a series of specific elements. For Case Study B, however, a more generalised perception was articulated through reference to seminars and to the expectation that students demonstrate aspects of their DipSW core competence-related knowledge and skills within the university context. However, for these respondents – and across the three case studies – the most readily, clearly and strongly proposed example of where use of the competence-based approach could be seen within the respective programmes was during the periods of agency-based practice learning and practice teacher respondents referred to this only.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning)

• Perceptions of the merits and limitations of competence-based learning:

Perceptions as to the strengths and limitations of the competence-based approach were not directly enquired into. Nonetheless, responses inevitably conveyed a sense of interview participants' perspectives in this regard. Two commonly expressed concerns across the three case studies, frequently voiced in combination, were that a competence-based framework for learning represents an approach that is both reductionist in the sense of over-simplification and fragmented in that a holistic understanding of the role and tasks of social work is disrupted and divided through the analytic breakdown of its component parts. This confirms the unease voiced by, for example, Collins (1991) and Owens (1995). Such concerns were by no means universal, however, and represented a minority view amongst respondents. Indeed, some student responses demonstrated that learners may find such clear demarcation of what is required of them positively helpful thus confirming the view that clarity as to what is to be achieved in the course of a period of learning is a beneficial aspect of the competence-based approach (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches'). Further echoes of the arguments for and against the use of the competence-based approach put forward by commentators and considered within Chapter Two included the view, as previously noted, that it provides a means of attempting at least to ensure fitness for practice but that caution should be exercised due to any competence-based framework inevitably being a product of its time and thus vulnerable to becoming outdated, possibly quite rapidly.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning)

• The competence-based approach and university-agency interaction:

The above responses suggest that there is a question to be asked concerning the degree of integration between both the university and agency partners and teaching and learning sites. The finding that the competence-based approach is predominantly and more immediately associated with the agency-based practice learning arena in comparison with that of university-based learning implies a dissonance, disparity or disjuncture between the two. Certainly the perception of respondents that it is in the course of periods of agency-based practice learning – or placements – that the competence-based approach comes to the fore indicates some kind of imbalance in use, or unequal application, of the approach which, in turn, points to a lack of integration between the two learning spheres. And since a founding principle of DipSW programmes is that they should be provided on the basis of collaboration between universities and practice agencies (Payne 1994), this raises an important question in relation to each of the three case studies as to the nature of these collaborative relationships.

This issue of the interplay between the university and agency elements of qualifying social work programmes has presumably always been an important feature of UK social work preparation since this has always involved both university and agency based periods of learning (see Chapter Two: 'The competence-based and the reflective learning approaches and social work education'). This was underscored by the CCETSW requirement that DipSW programmes should be delivered and developed on the basis of:

> 'Clear, well-managed collaborative arrangements between programme providers who will include at least one educational institution and one social services agency' (CCETSW 1995:14).

Notwithstanding CCETSW's use of the term 'collaboration', which may be taken to refer to some form of working together, the term 'partnership' has increasingly come to be used to refer to the joint working arrangements between universities and agencies in relation to the provision of DipSW programmes (Kemp 2000). Partnership, however, implies a very different approach in that it rests on ideas of commonality as to a shared

concern, of mutuality, and of (equal) participation (Beresford and Trevillion 1995, Carnwell and Buchanan 2005, Lymbery 2006). In this context, what appears to be demonstrated by the data from the three case studies is that the agency element of each programme is that which is predominantly characterised by the competence-based approach in comparison with the university elements and thus that collaboration or partnership in each case rests on the two constituent parts of each programme being typified by different approaches to learning rather than a single integrated approach.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning)

• Competence-based learning and the use of knowledge:

Kemp (2000:83) links the question of partnership – and of tensions within this - in the provision of qualifying social work programmes to that of the relationship between theory and practice (and the relationship between competence and reflection) when she suggests that it is 'mirrored in the supposed dichotomy between theory and practice and between the competent and the reflective practitioner'. Similarly, Doel (2000:162) points to 'a gap' between the university and agency-based elements of social work programmes and maintains that this 'will only be fully bridged when the conceptual gulf between theory and practice is likewise filled'. Neither Case Study A nor Case Study C respondents appeared to conceptualise competence-based learning as involving or embracing the use of theoretical knowledge to any significant extent. Given this, the repeated predominant illustration of the competence-based approach as characterising agency-based practice learning could be seen as suggesting that these periods of student learning are not viewed as places where the making of clear and overt connections between theoretical ideas and practice activities is core business. It is certainly the case that historically, practice teachers have not expressed confidence regarding their own capacity either to make these connections or to promote student learning and development as to theorising their practice (Thompson 1995, Fisher 1997, Fisher and Somerton 2000).

Notwithstanding reservations of this kind on the part of practice teachers, each of the six DipSW core competences is explicitly underpinned by specific areas of knowledge. In relation to the first of the six core competences, for instance, 'Communicate and Engage', sixteen components of a relevant and specific knowledge base are listed within the Rules and Requirements for the DipSW (1995). These include knowledge requirements such as: 'Economic, social, demographic, cultural, religious, linguistic, environmental and political factors, and their implications for social work practice in the United Kingdom'; 'Sources and forms of oppression, disadvantage and discrimination and their impact at a structural and individual level in society'; 'Theories of power and authority in relationships between children, young people, adults, groups and communities'. And so on. It is not clear, however, from the definitions and understandings proposed by respondents (from within Case Studies A and C at least) where and how this knowledge is drawn upon within the context of agency-based practice learning. The absence of reference to the use of such underpinning knowledge as part of the competence-based approach suggests the possibility that it was not talked about because it was not thought about, and that it was not thought about because it was not being carried out. In other words, that the competence-based learning undertaken by students during periods of practice learning does not include the use of theoretical ideas in making sense of practice situations. A variety of explanations for this can be considered. Firstly, it is possible that teaching and learning regarding social work knowledge that is not immediately agency-orientated e.g. procedural, in nature is seen as the business of the university and as being undertaken during the university-based elements of social work programmes. Such a perception would, of course, directly indicate that agency-based practice learning is perceived primarily as training and that there is an accepted separateness between practice training and university education in that distinctly different things are expected to happen in the course of each of these. Flowing from this, it is also possible that the theory-practice gap or divide (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches') that has for so long provoked anxiety as an obstacle to, among other things, a clearly and confidently expressed professional social work identity, is not something that in reality (as opposed to rhetoric) is becoming progressively closed. Far from being a thing of the past, a reluctance to

engage with theoretical ideas and anti-intellectualist stance on the part of some social workers may be more common and pervasive than is comfortable for contemporary social work commentators to always fully acknowledge. Such a position is vividly conveyed by Thompson (2005:157-8) as follows:

> ''Forget that college nonsense ..... you're in the real world now.' This attitude is perhaps less prevalent than it once was but I continue to meet people who report that this mistrust of all things theoretical is alive and well and thriving in various social work settings.'

Perhaps Case Study A and C respondents are indicating that, in their experience, a gap between theory and practice persists – and that, for them, one way of managing this is to locate practice learning within the concept of a competence-based approach that is essentially atheoretical in nature and thus that does not involve or require theorising in relation to what is being learned. Hence the use, particularly the substantial use, of a competence-based approach may be seen as maintaining and even as widening a sense of an impassable divide between theory and practice in social work.

A different and perhaps slightly more optimistic possibility would be that respondents do recognise theory and practice both as intertwined and as part of the necessary learning to become a social worker, but see the relationship as essentially deductive and as operating on the basis of knowledge being learned in one place and applied in another. In this view, the development of theoretical knowledge could quite reasonably and legitimately be seen as the remit of the university rather than the agency. Such a perception would not bode well however, for the integration of the university and agency-based programme constituent parts and could imply a predominantly technical rational form of social work identity (see Chapter Three: 'The transformation of professionalism'). Indeed, the data could be seen as roundly endorsing the findings of an earlier CCETSW (1995:2) investigation with regard the DipSW which concluded that:

> '.... although 'theory' and 'practice' have been positioned as the two key elements of social work training, integration of the two remains problematic and

elusive. The study found little evidence that they are actively joined together; theory appears to be what goes on in lectures and seminars while practice is what students do on placement.'

Within Case Study B a strong association between competence-based and practice learning was less universal. Whilst practice teachers expressed this, student and programme personnel respondents spoke also of the presence of the competence-based approach within the context of university-based teaching and learning. This is interesting since these same respondents defined the competence-based approach in considerably wider terms (that is, as encompassing theoretical and research-based knowledge and as embodying a reflective element) than either practice teachers within the case study or respondents from Case Studies A or C. For Case Study B then the way in which competence-based learning was conceptualised could be seen as less immediately related to training but as indicative as well (or instead) of educational processes. Furthermore, the collaborative arrangements for programme provision may be seen as less directly characterised by different processes taking place in different periods and settings of the overall programme. Flowing from this is the implication that theory and practice were understood more as mutually informative and less as separate entities positioned on either side of a conceptual and operational gap or divide.

As noted, however, practice teacher respondents within Case Study B perceived a close relationship between practice learning and the competence-based approach and appeared to understand the approach primarily in technicist terms. This raises a question as to the intra-relationship between practice teachers working directly with students and agency-based programme personnel (practice learning managers or coordinators) who, in defining competence-based learning as encompassing the use of theoretical knowledge and of reflection, appeared to share the views of university-based tutors (and students). Thus the perceptions of agency-based practice teachers and their representatives appeared at odds; it seemed that the understanding of agency-based programme personnel was not being effectively shared with and assimilated by practice teachers. Given the central and directly influential role played by practice teachers in relation to student learning (Rea

2000), it must be acknowledged that notwithstanding the broader interpretation adopted by agency-based practice learning coordinators and university tutors, the possibility exists of practice teachers operating their role in such a way as to contribute to a sense of distance – if not of dissonance – between university and agency and between theory and practice.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Competence-based Learning)

Reflective Learning

In putting forward the ideas they associated with the term 'reflective learning' respondents generally were a little more hesitant and slightly more equivocal than in explaining their understanding of a competence-based approach. This, perhaps, bears out the contention that the clarity and apparent transparency of the competence-based approach to learning leads to it being readily understood and this in turn imbues it with a certain appeal in its own right (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches'). It was also notable that respondents tended to discuss reflective learning in comparative terms i.e. as *less* amenable to objective assessment yet *more* facilitative of continuing professional development, than a competence-based approach. It must be acknowledged that respondents had been asked for their understanding of competence-based learning immediately prior to being asked about reflective learning and thus some comparative comment is perhaps to be expected. Nonetheless it is also the case that much of the literature concerned with the two approaches also discusses the merits and limitations of reflective learning in a similarly comparative manner (as above, see Chapter Two). This is perhaps due to reflective processes being perceived as a kind of counterweight or balancing influence to that of the more technicist competence-based approach.

• Reflective learning and analytic thought – critical or functional?

No respondents referred directly to the work of any of the reflective learning theorists discussed in Chapter Two ('Origins and meanings of the reflective learning approach') or to the frameworks for such learning developed by these. However, the notion of critical analysis as a key and typifying feature of reflective learning was expressed almost without exception by interviewees from each of the respondent groups and across the three case studies and this, of course, is central to the processes outlined by thinkers in relation to reflective learning. The theme of taking apart learning and experience in preparing for qualified social work is common to both competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Where the approaches would appear to differ regarding this shared theme of dissection is in their conception of its purpose. While a competence-based approach emphasises the breaking down of learning opportunities on the basis of functional analysis, the better to demonstrate and assess performance in relation to the component elements of these, a reflective learning approach emphasises the unravelling of learning opportunities on the basis of critical analysis, the better not only to understand but also to engage in a process of questioning in relation to these. But what is the purpose of such critical questioning? What is it aimed at and seeking to achieve? The answer from a competence-based perspective would appear to be that reflective analysis may be of use in clarifying where and how activity by a learner demonstrates satisfactory performance i.e. competence. In these terms, such analysis may at times be desirable (e.g. if a learner is having difficulty in establishing the links between their activities and required competences) but is not necessarily always essential. Nor is such analysis necessarily critical since its purpose is to prove that something has occurred rather than to question why it has occurred in the way that it has or what the implications of this might be. From a reflective learning perspective, however, the answer would be that critical analysis *is* both necessary and essential in order that social work learners understand - and are able to show - not only the what and also possibly the how but, crucially, the why of their activities (Kelly and Horder 2001). Moreover, in this view critical analysis as a core element of learning is seen as the precursor of and precondition for subsequent development by learners that arises not simply from their engagement, even repeatedly,

with a learning activity but also from the critical questioning that is undertaken as part of this engagement.

Another way of conceptualising this distinction may be to consider the difference between single-loop and double-loop learning (see Chapter Two: 'Origins and meanings of reflective learning'). This is summarised by Redmond (2006:43) as follows:

> 'Single-loop learning refers to the acquisition of enough skills to maintain an existing situation, whereas double-loop learning allows for a critical appraisal of the existing situation and, if this is found to be defective, new skills to set new goals and new behaviours need to be acquired in order to achieve these goals.'

Redmond goes on to illustrate this point by using the example of a teacher who, by developing skills in classroom management aimed at minimising the actual and potential distractions being experienced by students, on the basis that this creates a more conducive learning environment, demonstrates single-loop learning through developing further and new classroom management skills as a response to signs that students are nonetheless distracted. If, however, the teacher responds to such signs of student distraction by questioning the effectiveness of their original understanding i.e. that classroom control minimises distraction and thus maximises student learning, and is prepared to consider different understandings such as that distraction may arise from student disaffection with a particular teaching style or topic then the teacher is demonstrating a more critical and therefore double-loop form of learning. Redmond's illustration can be readily transferred to the world of the social work learner who may, for example, anticipate that a certain type of environment will best facilitate an interview with a service user and respond to ongoing reticence on the part of the service user by making a series of controlled adjustments to the interview environment thereby learning from the experience on a single-loop basis. By questioning the style of conduct of the interview or the nature of its content and considering different ways of approaching this, however, the social work student will engage in double-loop reflective learning.

This differentiation seems to demonstrate quite vividly the variance between analysis based on unpacking a situation, however thoughtfully this is undertaken, and that based on critically unravelling it. Both may be located beneath or within the umbrella concept of 'reflective learning' but the former would appear more closely allied to competence-based learning. This is not so much because it resonates with the functional analysis characteristic of a competence-based approach, though echoes of this are audible. Rather, the emphasis upon discernible changes in behaviour on the part of a learner, stemming from some kind of review of their previous activity, locates analysis of this type within a behavioural school of learning which 'bases its view of human behaviour primarily on observable behaviours rather than attitudes, knowledge and beliefs'(Beverley and Worsley 2007:43). Thus changes in action become the predominant purpose of the analysis as opposed to changes in thinking and understanding. Furthermore, Beverley and Worsley (2007) highlight that behavioural theories of learning and development focus more upon what is done by the teacher than the student. If, following behavioural analysis of a situation, a teacher's instruction or suggestion results in different actions by a student then the purpose of such unpacking is seen to be achieved. Once again then, a return is made to the outcome of satisfactory performance - or competence - by the learner as the fundamental aim of the learning process. And this may be irrespective of a student's doubts or difficulties. As long as the student can develop skills adequate to the task in hand, the questions, uncertainties, creative ideas and so on that the student may have regarding any aspect of the learning opportunity may become redundant, or at least superfluous to the ultimate goal of demonstrating competence. In this way then 'reflection' may be seen as becoming 'competencised', partly because analysis is purposefully directed towards an end point of effective behavioural performance by the learner and partly because 'reflection' can be 'ticked off' or otherwise confirmed as achieved in a finite manner.

This is perhaps embodied within the sixth DipSW core competence: 'Develop Professional Competence' (1995), wherein a specific practice requirement is that students must be able to 'Contribute to the maintenance, critical evaluation and development of own professional practice, knowledge and values.' Six components of a required

knowledge base underpin this core competence. Yet just one of these refers to critical analysis or reflection: 'Critical analysis, reflective practice and transferability of knowledge, skills and values'. The proposed evidence indicator (a suggestion as to how students may tangibly illustrate their performance in order to claim the area of competence as met or achieved) for this practice requirement is 'Work with others to identify, critically analyse, and take action to meet own learning and development needs'. In DipSW terms then, the link between 'critical' analysis, reflection and behavioural development is explicit.

The use of a wholly or mainly behavioural and non-critical mode of analysis by social work students (and educators) suggests that learning is being undertaken on the basis of training rather than of education. As previously outlined, training may be recognised as aimed at learning which, in the shortest terms, is more concerned with technical proficiency than with critical appreciation. For Webb (1996:182), the distinction between education and training is that the former 'wrenches the heart out of the cherished and taken-for-granted, as it inspects and interrogates' whereas the latter 'cannot be bothered with these questions of deep structure. It looks rather to the observationally verifiable. It suspends consideration of the existentially or epistemologically troubling.' Clearly, critical analysis for the purpose of stimulating continued enquiry, rather than unquestioning acceptance, is more akin to this portrayal of education. Behavioural analysis for the purpose of identifying discernibly more effective forms of action is more closely allied, however, to Webb's description of training. In the same way then that a question as to the relationship between competence-based and reflective learning approaches within social work may be re-framed as a question regarding the relationship between social work training and education, a further related or alternative question emerges in the form of 'what is the relationship between behavioural or functional and critical forms of analytic thought in learning for social work?'

Ostensibly, this distinction between critical versus functional approaches to analysis is not immediately relevant since respondents commonly spoke in terms of critical thinking when expressing their understanding of reflective learning. In many cases, however, the

term 'critical' was not further explained by respondents and it is therefore unclear as to how, precisely, this was being defined and used. This is important since, as Jones-Devitt and Smith (2007:6) point out:

> 'Many commentators have sought to provide a definitive view of critical thinking yet there is no overall consensus of opinion; merely a collection of responses that can be clustered into several domains.'

Jones-Devitt and Smith proceed to illustrate their assertion by highlighting a range of varying definitions of critical thinking and presenting these 'domains' as follows:

Definitions of critical thinking

Definition	*Source*	*Comments*
An approach to ideas from the standpoint of deliberate consideration	Harris (2001)	Involves notion of 'distancing' in order to be dispassionate and thus arriving at a more effective judgement
Reasonable, reflective thinking that is focussed on what to believe and do	Ennis (1995)	Implies that an 'active' dimension should be present; process underpinned by an instinctive quality linked to beliefs
Thinking about your thinking, while you're thinking, to make it better, more clear, accurate and defensible	Paul (1995)	Primarily abstract activity that enables a robust defence
Thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal-directed	Halpern (1989)	Highly instrumental process that is target-driven in essence
The ability to solve problems by making sense of information using creative, intuitive, logical and analytical mental processes ... and the process is continued	Snyder (1993)	Seeks answers using a range of potentially conflicting attributes

Jones-Devitt and Smith (2007:7)

What is evident from this typology of definitions is that, in broad terms, critical thinking may be understood alternatively as primarily concerned with responding to situations in terms of outcomes i.e. how best to achieve particular goals or targets?, or as mainly for the purpose of enhanced understanding of situations i.e. how can something be most coherently made sense of? In Jones-Devitt and Smith's (2007:7) terms: 'whether the

process of critical thinking is viewed essentially as engagement in problem-solving as opposed to sense-making per se.' The statements by many respondents did not indicate which of these conceptualisations they had in mind in relation to reflective learning. However, respondents spoke, not infrequently of reflective learning as a vehicle for evaluating and improving practice and for ensuing development on the part of learners. In other words, as a means of enhancing outcomes for service users and also for students in terms of their learning. This suggests strongly that the interpretation of critical thinking as an element of reflective learning, by respondents from each of the case studies, is more closely akin to more instrumental definitions that are linked to discernible actions. This is perhaps understandable since much of social work literature regarding reflection also makes this connection. Horner (2006:9), for example, is quite unequivocal in exhorting students to develop:

> 'a questioning approach that looks in a critical way at your thoughts, experiences and practice and seeks to heighten your skills in refining your practice as a result of these deliberations. Reflection is central to good social work practice, but only if action results from that reflection.'

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Reflective Learning)

• Reflective learning and reflective practice:

It may be that this apparent connection between critical analytic thought and the goal of improved social work practice skills also explains a further theme in respondents' expressed imagery of reflective learning; that of a common conflation of reflective learning and reflective practice. Repeatedly, respondents described their understanding of reflective learning as in some way to do with and as illustrated by reflective practice; reflective learning and reflective practice were referred to as somehow synonymous, and the terms were often used interchangeably. But are these are in fact conceptually interchangeable? Or does reflective learning refer to a more abstract process of thought and enquiry (in line, for example, with Paul's (1995) conceptualisation of critical thinking) and reflective practice to an outcome of this that is action-based and

discernible? And furthermore, do students need to be exposed to and to engage with reflective learning as a precursor to and in order to be enabled to demonstrate reflective practice? It appeared, as a core theme across each of the case studies and each of the respondent groups, that no clear distinction was being drawn between reflective learning processes and reflective practice. Indeed, the equally commonly expressed association between direct practice learning opportunities, inductive thinking and reflective learning/practice, certainly by students and practice teachers, suggests that for many if not most respondents the cyclical, experiential processes proposed by influential theorists such as Schonn (1983) and Kolb (1984) as models for reflective practice are what constitute reflective learning.

These findings signal a return to the question of the relationship between functional and critical analyses within social work learning and imply that, within the agency-based practice learning element of programmes at least, more goal-driven, instrumental and also functional modes of thinking may dominate yet have become subsumed beneath a general banner of 'reflection'. This inference is strengthened by the example put forward by all respondent groups within each case study as to where illustrative use of a 'reflective learning' approach can be found within their respective programmes: all referred to the reflective accounts of and commentaries upon direct practice learning encounters that students are required to write yet few referred to other instances such as supervisory or teaching and learning dialogue between students and practice teachers. This would appear to confirm that reflective learning is understood as inextricably linked to, and even dependent upon, practice experience and an appraisal of performance in relation to this by students.

Questions emerge from this apparent perception of a strongly mutually informative alliance between reflective and experiential learning. Firstly, there is a question as to whether this promotes a form of development that does not extend beyond the level of single-loop learning – and whether this may become a means of entrapment in and of itself (Argyris and Schonn 1974, Wallace 1999) that arrests further learning. If the measure of a social work student's reflective development is that they demonstrate some

form of improvement or advancement in their performance through, or on the basis of, previous experience, then a relatively uncritical approach that amounts to little more than learning from one's mistakes may become accepted as reflective learning. A further question relates to the transferability of such experientially based learning. Wallace (1999) queries the portability of experiential learning derived from models such as those proposed by Kolb (1984) and Schonn (1987) and contends, for example, that: 'Kolb does not address the transferability of what has been learned from one experience into another.' (1999:236). In this view then students may improve their performance, through a reflective process, in relation to a particular learning experience but such reflection does not necessarily equip them to carry over their learning and subsequent development into new and different situations. These questions appear to reinforce a point made earlier; namely that a reflective learning approach that is deployed primarily in terms of thinking aimed at performance improvements leads inevitably to the 'competencisation' of reflection.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Reflective Learning)

• Different forms of reflective learning:

Certain of the responses to the question of how the reflective learning approach was perceived suggested a wider understanding than the predominantly outcome-focussed conceptualisation discussed above. For instance, the notion that reflective learning may be characterised by an inductive approach to the use of knowledge was put forward as were the ideas that both self-awareness and reflexivity in relation to the social world are promoted by reflective learning. Although these findings were neither frequently expressed nor consistently articulated across the case studies, they nonetheless represent an important element of the overall perception of reflective learning.

Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery and Cooper (2008:14) propose: 'different types or levels of reflection, which may exist together or separately: technical, practical, critical and process.' This is an interesting alternative to the 'either/or' conceptualisation of forms of

critical thinking put forward by Jones-Devitt and Smith (2007) ('problem-solving' versus 'sense-making'). Rather than representing these forms of reflection as utterly distinct from and even irreconcilable with one another, Wilson *et al* (2008) suggest the concept of a kind of jigsaw of reflection wherein different pieces (forms of reflection) may fit together to form an overall picture. Though blended into a composite of 'reflection', the emphases placed variously upon the different forms will reveal the dominant theme(s) within a reflective mode whilst leaving room for and acknowledging the place of the less pronounced themes. This then is a useful framework for understanding the more readily expressed and less frequently articulated themes in the respondent perceptions of reflective learning.

'Technical' reflection refers very much to the more instrumental, outcome-focussed and problem-solving approach that has been discussed as typifying the perception of reflective learning held by many respondents. 'Practical' reflection, in contrast, encompasses a broader view or scope and includes the 'personal and professional assumptions underpinning practice' (2008:15). Thus awareness of self on the part of the learner explicitly forms part of and is encouraged by reflective consideration. Here, an important observation is that whilst a minority of respondents referred to self awareness as part of their understanding of reflective learning, none of these, or any other respondents, suggested this as a potentially uncomfortable exercise for a learner that needs to be carefully orchestrated within appropriate conditions. Yip (2006) argues strongly, however, that such self-reflection, unless undertaken within a highly supportive environment, may be experienced by learners as harmful and even destructive. The apparent lack of recognition of, or concern regarding, this possibility by respondents from any of the case studies raises a question as to the extent of rigorous self-involvement within their reflective experience.

'Critical' reflection, in Wilson *et al*'s terms, 'seeks to challenge the prevailing social, political and structural conditions that promote the interests of some and oppress others.' (2008:15). This is also the definition of critical reflection put forward by Fook (2002) who emphasises that this form of reflection is aimed primarily at discovery of structural

power relations and dynamics and how these arise and are perpetuated. Finally, 'process' reflection is concerned with uncovering the ways in which engagements with others are influenced, at both conscious and unconscious levels, by what the various parties bring to the interpersonal relationship. Again, then, self-awareness on the part of the learner is encouraged.

What Wilson *et al*'s (2008) typology demonstrates in this context is that the way in which reflective learning was understood by respondents within and across the case studies straddled and encompassed a range of forms of reflection. Whilst technical reflection appeared to be the major type of reflection that featured in respondents' understanding, glimpses of practical and critical reflection and, to a yet lesser extent, process reflection were also evident. Thus it would appear that not only is the relationship between critical and functional forms of analytic thought relevant to an appreciation of reflective learning as expressed by case study respondents but also the relationship and interplay between ever more distinguishable forms of reflection needs to be considered.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Understandings and Illustrations of Reflective Learning)

Summary:

To conclude, this chapter has explored in some depth the ways in which each of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches were interpreted, defined and discussed by respondents. A relatively detailed examination of the findings has been offered since the understandings of the approaches held by respondents are foundational to their subsequent responses. What appears to emerge is that even before the central issue of the relationship between the two approaches is directly enquired into, a series of other forms of relationship are discussed in relation to how the respective approaches are understood separately. The competence-based approach to learning has been considered in terms of the relationship between teaching and assessment, between education and training, between university and agency sites of learning and between theory and practice. The reflective learning approach has been discussed with regard to the

relationship between critical and functional analytic thought, between reflective practice and reflective learning and, finally, between different forms of reflection. It would appear then that within pre qualifying social work education a network of perceived relationships contextualise that which may be discerned between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

Chapter Seven: Competence-based and Reflective Learning within the DipSW

Introduction

This chapter may be seen as going to the core of the research enquiry. It discusses themes arising from the responses made to those interview questions which most directly explored the perceived nature of the relationship between the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches within qualifying social work programmes. Namely the perceived sense of balance between – or equality of use of – the two approaches; respondent views as to whether the two approaches can work together and be used in a mutually complementary manner; whether any sense of contradiction or even conflict between the two approaches is seen to exist; where dual deployment is most immediately illustrated and, finally, suggestions as to how this may be enhanced.

The analytic themes or questions that are considered within this chapter are identified as follows; firstly, in discussing their perception of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches as used in a mutually informative and balanced manner, might respondents' belief in this derive from a conflation of the two approaches into a single model of learning and development wherein the two approaches are understood and deployed as two aspects or dimensions of one unified approach? Is this borne out by the expressed sense of confidence in the ability of the two approaches to be used in harmony, coupled with the findings regarding a perceived absence of actual or potential tension between the two approaches? Furthermore, does the view of some respondents that the competence-based approach is a foundational, and reflective learning a more advanced, form of development also point to such a unified perspective?

The second identified analytic theme explores the possible imbalance in the use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches in terms both of the minority view of competence-based dominance and the more widespread apparent contradictions in the

views expressed by respondents. The discussion seeks to tease out and examine these contradictions in relation to the expressed sense of tension between the two approaches, the illustrations put forward as to their joint use and the suggestions made for increasing and improving this integration.

Thirdly, the theme of time as a recurring issue within responses is considered. The sense of sufficiency of this and the impact of enough time for teaching and learning processes to enable the use of reflective learning alongside the use of a competence-based approach are discussed. Respondent views that a competence-based framework such as the DipSW will necessarily dominate on introduction are also explored.

Two sides of the same coin: two aspects of a single approach?

Whilst educator respondents from both Case Studies B and C acknowledged that the use of the competence-based approach may appear more clearly in evidence, particularly in relation to agency-based practice learning, on these respective programmes, they nonetheless asserted the simultaneous use of a reflective learning approach. Moreover, that across the university-based and agency-based elements of the programmes the two approaches are drawn upon in a balanced manner. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, the most common and shared understanding of reflective learning appeared to be – in the shortest terms - that it involved behavioural analysis aimed at enhancing performance. This, together with the explicit connection made within the DipSW guidance (1995) between reflection and development on the part of social work learners, would seem to indicate that for many respondents reflective learning may be seen as a form of competence in and of itself. What follows from this then is the possibility that, rather than perceiving two conceptually distinct approaches to learning, these respondents may not in fact discern a great deal of difference between the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches: both are performance-orientated and both need to be tangibly demonstrated by students. Thus the issue of balance in the use of two quite different educational approaches perhaps becomes redundant since in asserting equal and

dual deployment of competence-based and reflective learning, respondents may be talking about the same thing: a competencised model of social work teaching and learning.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Perceptions of Use within the Case Study Programmes)

- Working together or as one?

In response to an interview question as to whether the competence-based and reflective learning approaches can be used alongside one another, respondents - from each case study and each respondent group - were strikingly unanimous in their views. Without exception, respondents were unequivocal in asserting that the two approaches not only can but do work together in the sense of each contributing an important dimension of effective social work learning. Whilst the approaches were repeatedly referred to as different, their complementary and even interdependent nature, to the point of inseparability, was insisted upon. Furthermore, it appeared that more than parallel use was being proposed and that respondents saw an inextricable integration of the two approaches as necessary for social work learning and development to have use and meaning and, in their experience, as existing. Thus, rather than two distinct approaches to learning being operated in tandem, however effectively, it would seem that respondents' perceptions were of such closely intertwined constituent elements as perhaps to comprise a single social work learning process. In support of this possibility are the findings from Case Studies 2 and 3 wherein no respondents expressed any sense of conflict or contradiction between the two approaches. This apparent articulation of an absence of disharmony or incompatibility is a far cry from the notion of a tussle for supremacy between two oppositional and competing approaches, each seeking to gain pre-eminence in the mind of the social work learner, which has been expressed within the literature (see Chapter Two: 'The competence-based and the reflective learning approaches and social work education'). It is possible then, that in focussing upon the differences between the approaches rather than areas of interface, commentators such as Horder (1998) and Ruch (2002) may have over-stated the potential for tension between them. Moreover, the

tendency within existing literature to evaluate the merits and limitations of each approach with reference to the other may have contributed to a form of compensatory understanding among respondents. Hence the weaknesses of one approach become offset by the strengths of the other in the perception of those involved with social work education and this, in turn, may give rise to the overall sense of unity and potential for synonomous use between the two that was expressed by respondents.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Perceptions of Use within the Case Study Programmes)

- Foundational and more advanced modes of a single learning process

Notwithstanding such an interpretation, however, educator respondents - certainly across Case Studies B and C - were clear in referring to the competence-based and reflective learning approaches as distinct in nature, albeit each informing and being drawn upon by their programmes. For some respondents, a way of expressing their sense of difference between the two approaches was to refer to competence-based learning as a foundational precursor of reflective learning as a subsequent and more advanced form of development. Rather than a differentiating characteristic, however, this delineation between levels of development could in fact be understood as further supporting evidence of the notion that reflective learning, for some respondents, is part of and integral to the competence-based approach instead of a different and distinct entity. In other words, the competence-based approach is seen as the bedrock of reflective learning and the reflective learning approach is seen as building upon and extending competence-based learning to a point of more advanced development – but they are distinct phases of a single process rather than wholly different approaches to learning. Hence this differentiation by respondents, although offered as a form of explanation as to how both approaches simultaneously make distinctive contributions to their programmes, may not actually elucidate this claim.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section a. Integrated Use of the Two Approaches)

- A 'model of skill acquisition' as a conceptual framework for understanding

Thus far it appears that respondents, when speaking of balance in the use by their programmes of competence-based and reflective learning approaches, may indeed be subsuming reflective learning within, and as part of, a single competencised approach overall. A possible conceptual framework for making sense of this apparently one dimensional view of the two approaches, or conflation of them, and specifically within the context of professional learning is represented by a stage model of professional development. An example of this that comes from Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) is a 'model of skill acquisition' and proposes five levels of development on the part of professional learners. This is presented in summary by Eurat (2001) as follows:

Summary of Dreyfus model of skill acquisition

Level 1 Novice
- Rigid adherence to taught rules or plans
- Little situational perception
- No discretionary judgement

Level 2 Advanced Beginner
- Guidelines for action based on attributes or aspects (aspects are global characteristics of situations recognisable only after some prior experience)
- Situational perception still limited
- All attributes and aspects are treated separately and given equal importance

Level 3 Competent
- Coping with crowdedness
- Now sees actions at least partially in terms of longer-term goals
- Conscious deliberate planning
- Standardised and routinized procedures

Level 4 Proficient
- Sees situations holistically rather than in terms of aspects
- Sees what is most important in a situation
- Perceives deviations from the normal pattern
- Decision-making less laboured
- Uses maxims for guidance, whose meaning varies according to the situation

Level 5 Expert

- No longer relies on rules, guidelines or maxims
- Intuitive grasp of situations based on deep tacit understanding
- Analytic approaches used only in novel situation or when problems occur
- Vision of what is possible

(Eurat 2001:111)

For Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), the key influencing factor that links the Levels and enables progress 'up' these, in the manner of a ladder, is performance experience. In this way, this model resonates with the experiential learning propounded by Kolb (1984). However, whilst Kolb emphasises conceptual reflection upon experience, Dreyfus and Dreyfus espouse repeated and consistent exposure to practice experience for professional learners as the most significant means by which learning and development may be achieved. Such immersion and repetition will, in their view, lead inexorably to the taking on, refining and increasingly sophisticated deployment of professional skills. Or, in their terms, progression from Novice to Expert status. At first glance, parallels may appear to exist between this model of skill acquisition and the technical rationalism of the competence-based approach, particularly the notion of development from a stage of unconscious incompetence, through those of conscious incompetence and conscious competence, to arrival at a final stage and state of conscious competence (Knott and Scragg 2007). Both, after all, would seem to hold that learning may be absorbed through routinised activity, through breaking down such activity into its constituent parts, and through repetition. It is through such measures that competence is arrived at. Where they differ, however, is in Dreyfus and Dreyfus's rejection of the notion of eventual skilled performance emerging simply on the basis of what they term 'calculative rationality' (1986:163). Instead, Dreyfus and Dreyfus propose that attainment of Level 4 proficiency and, ultimately, Level 5 expertise depends upon use by professional learners of intuition and of an ongoing body of tacit knowledge that is the fruit of an ever-expanding store of experience. In this model, functional analysis of the component elements of a skill or a task, although significant in the earlier stages, becomes largely superfluous as experience grows and learners become more, and more readily, able to perform on the basis of

intuition (the exception to this being that even Experts may need to revisit such analysis if and when confronted with completely unfamiliar situations).

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986:28) maintain that proficiency (as an advancement upon competence) is attained at the point where:

> 'No detached choice or deliberation occurs. It just happens, apparently because the proficient performer has experienced similar situations in the past and memories of them trigger plans similar to those that worked in the past and anticipation of events similar to those that occurred.'

And building yet further upon this:

> 'An expert generally knows what to do based on mature and practiced understanding ... an expert's skill has become so much a part of him that he need be no more aware of it than he is of his own body.'

Thus an osmosis-like developmental process occurs whereby learners, through accumulated experience, imbibe knowledge and skills that become exercised with increasing fluency born of familiarity until, in the shortest terms, practice makes perfect.

Clearly, this model may be critiqued in a number of ways. Eurat (2001), for example, points out that it assumes not only neutrality but infallibility on the part of the professional and fails to take account of the impact of personal identity upon professional judgement. Moreover, Eurat (2001:113) highlights the implicit danger of an over-reliance upon experience as a tutor since, through this, 'theories are likely to have been developed of dubious validity which then become self-confirming.' Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2006) express concern at the way in which in their view the apparent step by step clarity of the model veils, masks and otherwise fails to account for a number of important aspects of learning not the least of which is understanding of the skill being developed. The essentially non-reflective nature of this model is underlined by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986: 31) when in describing the professional pinnacle of expertise they contend that 'When things are proceeding normally, experts don't solve problems and don't make decisions; they do what normally works.' Hence development is from a state of knowing

the 'what' to one of also knowing the 'how' – and knowledge of the 'why' goes unregarded.

Despite the various possible critiques of their model, Dreyfus and Dreyfus have not been alone in contending that competence may not only be attained but enhanced, to the level of more advanced professional expertise, primarily through practice experience over time. Benner (1984) applied the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model to the development of clinical expertise by nurses and, similarly, proposed that advanced skills in nursing may be attained by simple virtue of length of service. For Benner, a nurse may typically proceed through skill Levels 1 – 3 (Novice to Competent) through regular rehearsal of standard and routine procedures over a period of two to three years. At this stage, Benner saw competent nursing as involving conscious awareness of and deliberation as to the component parts of each nursing task. Over a further three to five years, however, that still involve the same or similar nursing duties, nurses were seen to acquire an increased capacity for less deliberate and more fluent and rapid responses to situations and to move on from a developmental status of Competent to that of Proficient or even Expert. It is important to acknowledge that Benner's work advocates more than mere repetition and replication of tasks as a means of advancing ability. A key dimension of Benner's thinking as to progression from novice to expert is that of 'mindful practice'. This is explained by Andrews (1996:513) as 'constant examination and analysis of performance through active purposeful reflection'. A significant word here is 'purposeful' since it serves to remind that Benner is proposing an explicit link between such mindfulness and improvements to practice. It may be seen then that functional reflective analysis (as discussed in Chapter Six (see: 'Reflective learning and analytic thought – critical or functional?') is a feature of this model. This appears to be endorsed by Nardi and Kremer (2003:45) who, though describing mindful practice as 'a reflective experience that transforms immediate experience', proceed to suggest that reflection is centrally concerned with self-evaluation on the part of learners as to their demonstration of areas of required competence.

For both Dreyfus and Dreyfus and Benner then, practical 'know how', if rehearsed often enough leads in and of itself to deepened understanding and more advanced skills. A further suggestion as to how an essentially competence-based model of learning may enable a kind of 'Competent-Plus' level of development is made by Eurat (1994:167). Eurat, once more, focuses on experience over time as a mechanism for development and distinguishes between what he terms the 'scope dimension' and the 'quality dimension' of competence. Whilst the scope of a practitioner's competence means the range of roles, tasks and duties they are required to perform, the quality of such competence refers to:

> 'a continuum from being a novice, who is not yet competent in that particular task, to being an expert acknowledged by colleagues as having progressed well beyond the level of competence.'

Another way then of distinguishing between foundational and more advanced ability or capacity on the basis of length of service.

The point here is not to make a case for or against this model of skill acquisition but, rather, to note it as a possible framework for interpreting and understanding the views of respondents who assert that their programmes are characterised by dual use of both the competence-based approach to learning and of something other; something that is seen as 'higher order' learning, as more sophisticated and advanced than competence-based learning alone yet as complementary and perhaps as rooted in similar – if not the same – conceptual traditions.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section b. Integrated Use of the Two Approaches)

Different coins used in different ways: imbalance in the use of the approaches

What may be inferred from the dissenting voices i.e. those Case Study A respondents who challenged the view of dual and balanced use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches expressed by some of their immediate colleagues – as well

as by Case Study B and C respondents - by asserting dominance of the competence-based approach? Student respondents also, and from each of the case study sites, were far from unanimous in declaring an educational experience involving simultaneous and equal exposure to each of the two approaches. Indeed, of the ten student respondents overall only three reported a sense of such balanced use with the remainder referring variously to the dominance of either approach. These views could be taken as evidence of a negation of the ideas put forward thus far within this chapter in that they appear to point clearly to a perception of the two approaches as essentially distinct rather than as different aspects of one overall approach to learning. Alternatively, the view that the competence-based approach is more clearly in evidence within all or any of the case studies could be seen as further indicative support of the possibility that these qualifying social work programmes do not in fact understand and operate two essentially different learning processes but, rather, offer a single approach that is heavily influenced and informed, however implicitly, by competence-based ideas.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section b. Integrated Use of the Two Approaches)

- Perceived tensions:

As previously discussed, Case Studies B and C respondents stated no sense of incompatibility between competence-based and reflective learning. Case Study A respondents, however, were more cautious in their views and, notwithstanding their position that the two approaches may work alongside one another, articulated a perception of potential conflict between them. This was proposed in terms of a tension between on the one hand, a fragmentation of both social work learning and practice, occasioned through the breaking down of social work proficiency into a series of distinct constituent elements (practice requirements). The need for the production of specific evidential illustration of each practice requirement perhaps underlines and deepens this sense of a fragmented approach. On the other hand, a more holistic view of student development and social work practice, achieved through a reflective approach, was seen as desirable but as jeopardised by the rigid structure and insistent requirements of the

competence-based approach. These findings not only echo the merits and limitations of the respective approaches discussed in Chapters Two ('The merits and limitations of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches') and Six ('Perceptions of the merits and limitations of competence-based learning') but also confirm the unease referred to in the previous chapter regarding student learning needs becoming subordinate to the pursuit of evidence of the prescribed DipSW practice requirements. A further concern expressed by Case Study A respondents was that competence-based prowess by students may convey a misleading impression of effective practice development. In other words, if a student successfully evidences all practice requirements, even whilst they may have demonstrated limited reflective capacity, then they may be deemed to have passed the period of practice learning. Thus respondents became more explicit in highlighting competence-based learning outcomes as 'good enough' - and not necessarily more than this (see also Chapters Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches' and Six: 'Assessment and the competence-based approach').

The first of these perceived areas of conflict between the two approaches certainly appears to indicate that, for some respondents at least, they are clearly distinct. The second is more ambiguous, however, and would seem to point to criticism of or misgiving regarding the competence-based approach rather than a differentiation between this and reflective learning. Respondents from Case Studies B and C also stated reservations regarding combined and integrated use of the two approaches. Interestingly, these respondents, having clearly stated their view of an absence of contradiction or conflict between the two approaches proceeded, unasked, to outline a series of areas of possible tension. One such area was outlined in terms of balance: a disproportionate emphasis upon either approach was seen to be problematic. Linked to this was an apparent mistrust between the university and agency bases wherein disquiet was expressed that perhaps, during the periods of agency-based practice learning, the competence-based approach to learning and development is allowed to dominate and reflective learning (or even reflective practice) becomes marginalised in consequence. In articulating this misgiving programme personnel (including a Case Study B agency-based

respondent) appeared to be identifying a lack of effective collaboration between agency and university bases and to suggest that these hold different priorities. This was mirrored to an extent by practice teacher respondents from Case Studies A and C who spoke of students coming to the practice learning setting from the university with an already established preoccupation with the need to evidence practice requirements as an imperative, and apparently viewing reflective processes with considerably less urgency. The implication of this is that the mandate held by students is to produce competence-based evidence as a priority and to become involved with reflective learning if not quite as an afterthought then perhaps as a kind of optional extra. Shades of the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) framework for learning may also be seen as emerging from these practice teacher perceptions i.e. that novice to competent levels of skills acquisition are the primary focus of practice learning with progression to proficiency or expertise being desirable but not necessarily required. What is interesting about these responses is that whilst they do not always directly propose a tension between two different developmental approaches they do, once again, (see also previous chapter) raise the question of the efficacy of the relationship between university and agency partners. Programme personnel and practice teacher respondents seemed to each regard responsibility for promoting an ethos of and readiness to engage with reflective learning among social work students as resting with the other.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section b. Perceptions as to Conflict between the Two Approaches)

- Illustrating the amalgam:

Another way of considering these responses is to explore the illustrative examples cited by respondents of where, within their programmes, both dual and single, balanced and imbalanced use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches may be seen. A range of examples of combined use were put forward across the case studies: in all cases university-based teaching and learning was referred to, but in general terms only and just by programme personnel and student respondents. The common strand within these references was the significance of small group and seminar-based learning

opportunities – though the content and process of these were not discussed. This is perhaps indicative of the observation by Brockbank and McGill (1998:94) that, commonly, more is said about what constitutes effective learning than how this may be achieved. For Brockbank and McGill:

> 'Failure to unpack what may be involved in the process of facilitating learning is more likely to mean that we are thus stuck with laudable and prescriptive statements about what is good learning without being able to address how such learning can be engendered.'

As noted, it was from among Case Study A educator respondents that the view of competence-based dominance was most explicitly expressed and in asserting this, relations with agency partners and the periods of practice learning undertaken by students were cited. However, by other Case Study A respondents, as well as those from Case Studies B and C, agency-based practice learning processes were referred to as illustrative of dual and balanced use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. This was notwithstanding the apparent unease, highlighted in the previous section, that reflective learning may not be emphasised and drawn upon as much as the competence-based approach. All respondents (and all Case Study A practice teachers and student respondents) referred to the need for the use of both approaches to be evident in students' practice learning portfolios. Notably, although some practice teachers spoke of their approach to student supervision as combining both approaches, no student respondents mentioned this as an example.

A number of points arise in relation to these findings. Firstly, agency-based practice learning had previously been commonly cited by respondents across the case studies as a key illustration of where each of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches – when discussed separately – could be seen in operation. This raises a question perhaps as to whether, in using the same example to illustrate combined use, respondents were thinking of parallel rather than integrated use of the approaches. Another point is that in many senses practice learning portfolios epitomise competence-based learning since their central purpose is to present student evidence of their satisfactory demonstration of each required area and element of competence. It is within

these portfolios that students assert or claim that they have 'met' each practice requirement within each of the six DipSW Core Competences (Taylor, Thomas and Sage 1999, Beverley and Worsley 2007).

Strikingly, no student respondents discussed their experience of practice learning supervision as illustrative of combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Indeed, students made no reference to supervision at all despite the not infrequent assertion by practice teacher respondents that this is a key arena in which they see themselves drawing on both of the two approaches. Writing at the inception of the DipSW, Gardiner (1989) expressed the concern that it embodied an emphasis upon instruction by practice teachers over and above supervision. Or, at least, social work supervision that enshrined a blend of the three functions identified by Kadushin (1976): educative, supportive and administrative/managerial. The apparent absence of any student recognition, across any of the three case studies, of practice learning supervision as a venue and vehicle for reflective learning would seem to bear out Gardiner's concern. Moreover, Parker's (2004:69) more recent contention that such a concern that DipSW supervision 'may have promoted a shift in focus from deeper levels of learning and reflection upon the processes involved in that learning to instructional models was not realised' is not supported by the findings. Thus a query arises as to why practice learning supervision - described by Beverley and Worsley (2007:83) as so central to social work learning as to comprise 'the beating heart of the placement process' - was not proposed by student respondents as an example of reflective engagement. Similarly, the disparity in perception between student and practice teacher respondents as to the content and process of practice learning supervision raises a question. More than a question, a concern emerges in relation to what Yip (2006:780) terms 'appropriate conditions'. Yip argues that self-reflection i.e. 'a process of self-evaluation, self-analysis, self-recall, self-observation and self-dialogue', is a central element both of reflective learning and practice. For this to occur in a way that is not threatening – or even harmful – for the learner, Yip maintains that an open, encouraging and supportive space is required wherein the learner may feel safe to explore their sense of self, and be enabled in this. Clearly, supervision between a student and their practice teacher is a prime example of

such a space. Yet this was expressed implicitly only by practice teachers and not at all by student respondents.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section b. Illustrations of Integrated Use)

- Enhanced reconciliation of the two approaches?

When asked what might be helpful in facilitating use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches alongside one another (more), respondents had as many, if not more, suggestions as they had illustrations of current joint use, implying perhaps that respondents were not in fact quite as confident of and content with existing patterns of combined use as many of them claimed. Suggestions for change also appeared, yet again, to indicate a question concerning the collaborative partnerships between the university and agency bases, particularly within Case Study A. For instance, Case Study A student respondents proposed that university-based teaching could usefully refer to the DipSW core competences framing practice learning and that some university-based assessment events such as essays could be engaged with during the periods of practice learning and include practice learning analysis in terms of the core competences. This seems to indicate that these students not only did not see the core competences as sufficiently – or equally - explicit throughout the university-based elements of the programme but also felt that the programme could benefit from greater integration of university and agency teaching and learning. This view appeared to be shared by a Case Study A practice teacher respondent who stated the need for more and better communication between the university and agency bases both generally and specifically with regard to the content of university-based teaching. Case Study A programme personnel respondents suggested that university-based teaching could focus more upon social work skills development and consideration of personal identity by students and, in this, could emphasise formative assessment more than at present.

Both student and practice teacher respondents from each of the three case studies proposed more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning within qualifying

social work programmes and that these could also helpfully involve an increased number of directly and formally observed practices. Practice teacher respondents from across the case studies suggested that the style of practice teaching, especially in relation to student supervision, could become less directive or instructional and procedurally-based and more facilitative. The aim of reducing student preoccupation with or prioritising of the core competences was also expressed as desirable.

These proposals would appear to indicate that practice teachers were to some extent questioning their existing approach and, despite having previously asserted a supervisory style that draws on and promotes combined use of competence-based and reflective learning, were acknowledging their need to emphasise this more. It is also interesting that the recommendations for increased agency-based practice learning have in fact become enshrined within the 'new' social work degree (GSCC 2002). The other notable feature of the suggestions put forward for enhancing joint use of the two approaches is that they were made very much in terms of respondents' own domains or territory i.e. university-based respondents proposed changes within the university sphere and practice teachers suggested changes within the agency sphere. But only student respondents considered both - further indications perhaps that, for educator respondents, the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is tied closely to the relationships between agency and university partners.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section b. Facilitating Joint Use)

- Espoused theory versus theory-in-use: making sense of inconsistency:

It is difficult to discern consistency in respondent views regarding those questions that enquire directly into perceptions of dual and balanced use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Whilst repeatedly asserting distinctiveness between the two approaches, respondents possibly conflated them. Whilst some respondents expressed a perception of the two approaches as mutually complementary and as not in any form of conflict, they proceeded to identify a range and series of evident tensions.

Whilst the majority of educator respondents declared combined and balanced use of the two approaches they illustrated this assertion only very generally. Whilst practice teachers reported their use of both approaches in supervision - a claim not recognised by students - as an example of combined use, they also proposed that this needs to happen more. How to make sense of such apparent contradictions?

Argyris and Schon (1974) propose the view that individuals render their aspirations, ideas and thoughts coherent through the development of mental maps, comprising theories of action, that they use to navigate situations and experiences. Deriving from such maps and theories of action is a distinction between what Argyris and Schon term 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. Put crudely, espoused theory relates to what people say and theory in use to what it is that they actually do. More comprehensively, Argyris and Schon (1974:6) explain espoused theory as follows:

> 'When someone is asked how he would behave in certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance and which, upon request, he communicates to others.'

Theory-in-use contrasts with this however:

> '... the theory which actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of the incompatibility.' (1974:7).

It is important to be clear that no deception or deliberate manipulation is being suggested here. Rather, a dissonance between espousing or saying something and what is actually done may remain wholly or largely unconscious and people may be innocent of the fact that in effect they are doing something other from what they claim. Hence the assertion by respondents across the case studies that the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches each characterise their programmes in a more or less balanced fashion may be an espoused position, with their difficulty in illustrating such combined

and equal use in any detail arising from their theories-in-use i.e. how they in fact operate the programmes.

Argryis and Schon (1974) maintain that it is a human condition to strive for consistency and this creates a driver by which individuals seek to keep their theory-in-use (that is, how they try to enact their espoused beliefs) as constant as possible. Even where awareness emerges that decisions taken or behaviours demonstrated, for example, (theory-in-use) do not fit with or achieve what is espoused, it is preferable for people to continue to cleave to their theory-in-use and to accept (or possibly to deny) that they are not actually attaining or realising their espoused position. For instance, practice teacher respondents who espoused the blended deployment of competence-based and reflective learning approaches within student supervision yet also acknowledged that this does not presently take place sufficiently or sufficiently effectively may prefer ruefully to accept this perceived inadequacy in order to maintain their existing supervisory style and practices.

Argyris and Schon (1974) outlined the processes involved in the exercise of theory-in-use in the following way:

Governing Variables $\longrightarrow$ Action Strategies $\longrightarrow$ Consequences

To illustrate: a practice teacher's governing variable may be that they feel they are expected to know, understand and be effective in operating reflective learning processes yet in reality feel unsure and anxious regarding these – but unable openly to declare this. In order to manage such a governing variable the practice teacher's action strategies may be emphatically to assert the importance of such reflective processes whilst systematically avoiding discussion of these in student supervision by ensuring that the agenda is fully taken up with other matters e.g. procedural considerations. The consequences - or outcomes of the action strategies – are then that reflective learning processes are not engaged with yet may continue to occupy a position of significance. Meanwhile, the sense of ignorance, confusion or anxiety on the part of the practice

teacher remains concealed. In this way a sense of 'fit' between the governing variable of lack of understanding and concealment of this and what is acted out in terms of failure to prioritise reflective learning during supervision is achieved and maintained since the outcome is that reflective learning is consistently unaddressed. Thus a practice teacher may quite genuinely believe - and continue to espouse - that they promulgate the significance of reflective learning as part of their approach to supervision. And a student may be equally genuine in failing to recognise reflective processes within their supervision experience.

An alternative example may be wherein a member of programme personnel's governing variable is that, because they do not recognise anything very much in addition to the competence-based approach as typifying the qualifying social work programme with which they are involved they only, or predominantly, recognise the competence-based approach as being drawn upon - but do not feel that this should be so or that it is permissible for this to be openly stated. The action strategy in response to this may be repeatedly to expound the existence of an approach to learning (e.g. reflective learning) that is different from the competence-based approach and that may be used in addition. This action strategy gives rise to a consequence that is that the impression is conveyed by the member of programme personnel that both competence-based and some other form of learning are present and used within the programme. This cannot be substantiated through illustration with any specificity, however. This example differs from the previous one in that the outcome, in part, does not fit with or match the governing variable and therefore an unintended consequence arises. Disquiet regarding an inability to discern a significant level of use of an approach other than a competence-based one is not resolved through reference to the existence and use of something other because such dual use cannot be exemplified in a very detailed or compelling manner.

Each of the above examples may provide a means of making sense of the apparent contradictions in the responses articulated across the case studies and the respondent groups. Argyris and Schon's framework may show how what is espoused (e.g. 'this programme draws on both competence-based and reflective learning in a balanced way')

may be at variance with what actually takes place (e.g. 'but we cannot show where and how in any depth and may actually be using a single approach that is rooted in competence-based ideas'). Moreover, the model may show how the measures or action strategies used by respondents may or may not result in a consequence that fits with what they intend.

In response to an outcome of unintended consequences, Argyris and Schon (1974), and later Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith (1985), suggest that individuals resort to single or double-loop learning. This concept was discussed in Chapter Six (see 'Reflective learning and analytic thought – critical or functional?') and the difference between the two forms of learning was proposed as mirroring the distinction between functional and critical analysis. In terms of the second of the preceding two examples, wherein a lack of fit or match between governing variable and consequence arose, single-loop learning would involve the member of programme personnel reviewing their action strategies with the aim of attaining the same governing variable but by a different means. Rather than an assertion of the existence of an alternative to the competence-based approach and ensuing implication that this is used in conjunction then, different explanations as to why the competence-based approach appears pre-eminent throughout the social work programme - but isn't really – may be put forward. For instance, the suggestion that the competence-based approach simply appears more in evidence due to its transparency. So, in single-loop learning the governing variable remains unchallenged and unchanged and the theory-in-use process becomes 'self-sealing' (Redmond, 2006:44). Double-loop learning, in contrast, would involve a more radical and critical review encompassing the governing variable itself. Here, the member of programme personnel would consider and question why they recognise (only or mainly) the use of the competence-based approach within their programme and the implications of this. Thus more fundamental and emancipatory change becomes possible. In contemporary parlance this is an aspect of what is known as 'thinking outside the box'.

The purpose of this outline of Argyris and Schon's (1974) theories of action concept and, particularly, their distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-use has been to

present a possible framework for understanding the apparent contradictions in the views expressed by respondents. The framework may be useful in helping to elucidate why and how respondents, when considering direct questions regarding their perceptions of the relationship between competence-based and reflective learning, seem so frequently to offer inconsistent responses.

Time

Redmond (2006: 121-2) states: 'In reading the literature on reflective learning there is a dearth of material on the time scale in which reflective learning might be expected to occur.' She notes the tendency on the part of learning theorists towards the assumption that particular types of learning environment will be conducive to and promote reflective learning but that: 'What they fail to examine is how long students may have to be exposed to the learning environment before perspective transformation occurs.' Yet either implicitly or explicitly, and across case studies and respondent groups, the perception of reflective learning as time-consuming was expressed.

Many of the previously outlined suggestions made by respondents for enhanced integrated use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches were proposed in terms of additional time for agency – based practice learning than currently afforded within the DipSW. The amount of time perceived as necessary and presently allocated for the practice teaching role was also seen as inadequate - at least, inadequate for operation of the role other than in a predominantly instructional mode. This bears out the concern expressed by Green (2000) who, quoting both the then chair of the National Organisation for Practice Teaching and director of the British Association of Social Workers, maintains that practice teachers are simply not given the necessary time in which to do the job asked of them.

A further example of the perception of reflective learning as a time-consuming process was the practice teacher view that it is possibly unfair and even unwise to expose a pre-

qualifying student to time for reflective learning within the practice learning setting since opportunities for post qualifying reflective development will inevitably be curtailed by the demands of 'real world' social work practice. Although apparently an overly cautious or unduly negative perception, this reservation is endorsed by Yip (2006) who identifies certain conditions as essential for occupational reflection, not the least of which are time and space that are built into and endorsed by the organisational context. Without such organisational support, Yip argues, attempts at professional reflection may not only founder but may actually become experienced as harmful towards ongoing professional development. This view seems to suggest that reflective learning is potentially superfluous to both pre and post qualifying social work learning. Furthermore, it flies in the face of the exhortation, sewn throughout literature relating to practice teaching and learning that 'good practice' in terms of engaging with reflective processes should become established during pre qualifying practice learning. (Thompson and Thompson 2008) Taken together, these examples indicate that reflective learning processes are seen as lengthier than those associated with the competence-based approach which, in contrast, is seen as more expedient.

A view shared by respondents from each of the three case studies was that, on introduction, a competence- based approach will marginalise other approaches to learning since its detailed framework and myriad of requirements will initially appear complex and will take time to be understood and assimilated by those charged with operating it. This appears to endorse the critique, discussed in Chapter Two, of competence-based learning as overly bureaucratised. Respondents also noted, however, that competence-based frameworks and processes can, over time, become familiar to the point where these can be used more flexibly and creatively alongside reflective learning. This is an interesting inversion of a concern expressed by Owens (1995) when the DipSW was still relatively recently introduced. Owens (1995:61) suggested that 'increasing familiarity with the competences and how to provide evidence for them is beginning to root the culture' and raised the concern that such embedding would come to override and exclude considerations of reflective learning. Notwithstanding respondents' contradiction of such a concern, an important question arises as to how long may the familiarisation and

ensuing reconciliation of the two approaches that they spoke of take? This research was undertaken late in - indeed towards the end of - the life span of the DipSW. Yet the initial dominance of its competence-based apparatus remained sufficiently fresh in respondents' minds for it to be expressed within each of the case studies, implying that early feelings of being overwhelmed by its structure and requirements - and of these potentially marginalising a reflective learning approach - have not been entirely forgotten.

It is also important to bear in mind that social work practitioners who take on the role of practice teacher do not necessarily maintain this responsibility over time. Many studies have demonstrated that the ongoing shortage of practitioners equipped to serve as social work practice teachers is due in large part to the high rates of turnover amongst those undertaking practice teaching (Karban 1994, Rickford 1996). Lindsay and Tompsett (1998), for example, found from their survey of practice teaching throughout an English region, that 33% of practitioners, having become trained and certificated to undertake practice teaching, ceased taking on the role after one year. 50% of their respondents reported having ceased after two years and almost all had given up the practice teaching role within six years. This demonstrates that it is a minority of practice teachers who will have occupied this role over any length of time and raises a question as to whether relatively brief involvement with practice teaching represents enough time for the competence-based approach to have been sufficiently digested and harnessed in order that it be managed alongside reflective learning processes.

Allied to this is the issue of the inevitably limited 'shelf life' of competence-based frameworks (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches'). If such frameworks are regularly redrawn (e.g. every 10-12 years) in order to become revised and updated, then presumably the initial sense of competence-based dominance described by respondents will recur on an equally cyclical basis. This too was raised by Owens (1995:61) as a problematic aspect of the competence-based model. She notes that revised frameworks, whilst inevitably necessary, 'will ensure that the emphasis in practice teaching will continue to be weighted towards

the provision of evidence and its validation, rather than towards the enabling and teaching skills which promote students' learning.'

Lastly but by no means least, there is the question of student assimilation of competence-based requirements and structures. If educator respondents report having initially felt overwhelmed by these and having taken time to absorb and manage them in such a way as also to provide space for the facilitation of reflective learning, then how rapidly can students be expected to achieve this transition? In sum, many of the respondent comments regarding the amount of time needed for a newly introduced competence-based framework (such as the DipSW) to become assimilated and managed by (rather than managing of) those involved with its use seem to point to a contradiction. On the one hand there is an implied confidence and security deriving from the clarity and apparent logic of a competence-based approach (see Chapter Two: 'The merits and limitations of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches'). On the other hand, however, there is a lack of confidence and sense of insecurity deriving from the perceived challenge of dealing with a raft of highly bureaucratised procedures and requirements.

A number of possible explanations for the constant association made between reflective learning and an extended time period for learning may be proposed. Perhaps, once again, a conflation by respondents of reflective learning and reflective practice (see Chapter Six) is influential. As noted at the outset of this discussion, the literature relating to reflective learning has not characterised this as a necessarily lengthy or time-consuming process. Reflective practice, however, is commonly associated with a need for time and space (Clutterbuck 2001) and the absence or limited nature of available time is often cited as a major obstacle or even barrier to the exercise of reflective practice. Thompson and Thompson (2008: 132) observe for instance that:

> 'Perhaps the most commonly heard comment from practitioners attending training courses and workshops on the subject of reflective practice is: 'I'm too busy to take time out for reflection.'

Thus it may be that the repeated concern with and expressed need for more extensive time indicates that respondents are thinking in terms of reflective practice rather than reflective learning.

A different way of understanding the apparent preoccupation, amongst respondents, with time as essential for reflective learning could be that time in which to develop a body of experience is what is perceived as necessary. This explanation would therefore support the ideas discussed above; that respondents may view reflective developmental processes as part and parcel of a competencised approach to learning and that the emphasis upon experience over time within the models for professional development put forward by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and Benner (1984) is what gives rise to a perception of extended periods of time as a key ingredient of moving beyond technical competence to a more advanced form of operation and development.

Finally, a return to the previously discussed work of Argyris and Schon (1974) may provide a means of illuminating why it is that respondents so commonly and repeatedly understood reflective learning, both in its own right and in terms of its related use alongside a competence-based approach, as requiring, even depending upon, the availability of extended time. Within Argyris and Schon's schema of espoused theory versus theory-in-use, an espoused belief may be the desirability of reflective learning as a central plank of pre qualifying social work learning. As illustrated above the theory-in-use drawn upon may involve a governing variable that reflective learning must be expressed as an important constituent element of social work learning yet with a qualified sense of understanding and confidence regarding this, possibly at both individual and institutional levels. The action strategy implemented may be to assert an association between reflective learning and more time than is available to learners within either or both the agency-based practice learning or university-based contexts. Thus an outcome (which may be intended or unintended) of little or no experience or evidence of reflective learning actually taking place arises.

(For data relevant to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section b. Facilitating Joint Use and Perceptions as to Conflict between the Two Approaches)

Summary

This chapter has considered the data derived from a series of direct enquiries as to respondent perception of: which, if either, of the competence-based or reflective learning approaches prevails within their respective social work programmes and where this is illustrated; the potential for dual use and whether any impediment to this in the form of mismatch or tension is identified; possible strategies for enhanced dual use of the two approaches. A number of analytic themes emerge from this data that have been discussed and may be summarised in terms firstly of an understanding of the two approaches as aspects of a single overall model that is indicative of a stage model of professional education, exemplified by the concept of a series of steps that enable a learner to develop from 'Novice to Expert'. Secondly, certain marked inconsistencies within and between responses have been considered in terms of possible differences between what people say, or espouse, and what they do, or the terms of their action. Third and finally, the repeated theme of a temporal dimension as significant to the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches has been acknowledged and explored. The preceding chapter identified a thematic refrain, arising from the data, of the significance of a range of contextual relationships that surround and frame the question of the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Within this chapter this theme may appear more muted. However, a key relationship between the espoused and action theories that are held and adhered to by both educators and learners has emerged as a significant analytic dimension.

Chapter Eight: Programme Issues and Perceptions

Introduction

This third and final discussion chapter will explore remaining data in relation to three main areas. First, additional data regarding the perceptions of the place and use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the agency-based practice learning context will be considered. The manner in which the respective approaches are drawn upon to inform assessment of student performance (something that has already been touched upon in Chapter Six: see 'Assessment and the competence-based approach') will be explored as will respondent views of the preparation for practice learning that is undertaken with students and the written programme guidance as to practice learning that underpins and informs the practice learning process. Second, the university-based context is explored both in terms of the methods of teaching and learning that are recognised as used – and the extent to which these are seen as characterised by either or both competence-based and reflective learning. Further, the forms of assessment that are drawn upon for university-based student learning are considered. Third, the origins of programme culture, that is: where and how the particular synthesis of the competence-based and reflective approaches that characterises each case study programme is negotiated and developed are examined. Finally, the outcomes of the programmes in terms of respondent perceptions as to the nature of the professional social work identity promoted by the respective approaches are discussed.

The Agency-based Practice Learning Context

As has been demonstrated by much of the discussion thus far, respondents from each of the three groups within each case study frequently referred to the agency-based practice learning component of their respective programmes when considering wider questions as to the relationship between competence-based and reflective learning within their

programme. For example, many illustrations of the use of each of these approaches to learning have been proposed with regard to practice learning processes – and by student and programme personnel respondents as well as by practice teachers. What now follows is an exploration of respondent perspectives on certain issues specific to practice learning.

- Assessment of practice learning:

Writing just a few years before the introduction of the DipSW, Rowntree (1987:1) asserted: 'If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system we must look into its assessment procedure'. This is endorsed by Light and Cox (2001:169) who observe that 'it is particularly important to match the whole experience of assessment with what the programme is trying to achieve and the culture it is trying to create.' These statements arise from the well-established educational mantra that effective and appropriate assessment is part of a trilogy: curriculum content, teaching and learning approach *and* means and manner of assessment (Murphy 1999). The discussion in the preceding two chapters has revealed a number of issues regarding how far both what is taught and learned and the way that this is facilitated within the practice learning context, embodies integrated use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. It remains then to consider the extent to which integration of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is represented in the assessment of agency-based practice learning. The assessment of DipSW students' performance and progress in relation to their field practice learning within each of the three case study programmes was by means of the practice learning portfolios referred to in Chapter Five. These portfolios were pointed to by many respondents across each of the case studies as a key illustration of where and how dual use of competence-based and reflective learning is exemplified. As well as a number of documents aimed at demonstrating the nature and organisation of the practice learning opportunity, for example a practice learning agreement between student and practice teacher, the portfolio comprises a series of analytic commentaries or accounts, written by students and commented upon by their practice teachers, of specific practice learning episodes with which they have engaged. Also, accounts by practice teachers of

the practice learning that they have directly observed students undertaking (and in some instances the student also may have produced a commentary on the same observation) form part of the portfolio. It is on the basis of the evidence contained within this material that a student is assessed as having passed or failed the period of practice learning.

The use of portfolios for the assessment of social work practice learning can be problematic. In the first place there is a real risk, or even likelihood, that student learners will see the requirement to clearly report and match their activities in relation to the DipSW practice requirements and values as a primary and non-negotiable task – and that reflective consideration will then become secondary to this preoccupation. Thus student commentaries or accounts may become characterised by competence-based descriptive evidence over and above reflective analysis. Ixer (1999: 521) makes the point that the use of such narrative accounts within portfolios does not in fact provide a vehicle for student reflection but, rather, is a means of recounting learning that is necessarily 'outcome-based'. This is elaborated by Taylor (2006:206) who states that such accounts by social work learners 'are written to persuade educators and supervisors that the social worker can pass as a competent practitioner'. Furthermore, Taylor identifies that these accounts necessarily 'involve a selection and ordering of the 'facts' and the creation of a particular version whilst suppressing or concealing other possible versions.' Whilst by no means suggesting deliberate deception on the part of their authors, Taylor is nonetheless alerting the assessors of student accounts that these will have been written with a particular awareness of purpose and audience and that this needs to be kept in mind when evaluating student practice learning performance. A further issue relates to the practice teacher reports of directly observed student practice learning that, as noted, are another important element within portfolios. Since a practice teacher cannot possibly know or comment on a student's reflective thinking in the course of these observed episodes, the reports of observations must necessarily be no more than descriptions of what takes place and how this relates to the DipSW practice requirements and values. This is acknowledged by Ixer (1997) when he highlights the absence of evidence indicators for external assessment of reflection in action and questions how an assessor can measure, or

otherwise estimate, the internal reflection that may (or may not) accompany student actions.

Notwithstanding these dilemmas, however, the practice learning portfolio is the central means of developing and deciding upon the assessment of students in the agency-based context. Given respondent assertions that these portfolios embody and exemplify integration of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, it is reasonable to expect that the decision by a practice teacher as to whether a student should pass or fail a practice learning opportunity will demonstrate that a student has engaged effectively with and provided evidence of both their competence and reflective learning capacity. This may also be expected to feature in the decision-making of each programme Practice Assessment Panel, the purpose of which is to monitor and agree practice teacher assessments.

This expectation was borne out, initially, by the responses made by programme personnel and practice teacher respondents – without exception – from each of the three case studies: that evidence of competence only is insufficient for a student to be assessed as having passed a period of practice learning. Descriptive examples from students – or indeed from practice teachers – of where each of the DipSW practice requirements had been met in the course of the practice learning were commonly agreed by educator respondents as not comprising sufficient evidence to warrant or support a pass recommendation overall. In addition to, or as part of, such assertions of competence, respondents stated that student portfolios should include evidence of a learner's reflective capacity. This, it was suggested, is in some way inherent to a credible demonstration of competence and is manifested through a discussion of the behaviours and skills associated with the carrying out of a given practice requirement and/or value. It would seem then that what is required for a student to be assessed as having attained a pass level for their practice learning is convincing narrative that maps behaviour as well as events and actions against the DipSW practice requirements – technical reflection, in other words (see Chapter Six: 'Different forms of reflective learning'). Another way of putting this is in terms of the discussion between critical and functional modes of reflective

analysis also contained in Chapter Six (see 'Reflective learning and analytic thought – critical or functional?'). Having stated that descriptions of activity that may be mapped against particular practice requirements or values are not enough to justify assessment of students as having passed, respondents proceeded to qualify this by stating that what is required in addition is that students present some functional analysis of their actions and behaviour and, in so doing, may be assessed as having demonstrated effective reflective learning alongside satisfactory competence.

Moreover, further discussion by educator respondents from Case Studies B and C indicated that the imperative for portfolios to contain evidence of both competence and some form of reflective learning (albeit of a technical or functional nature) was perhaps an espoused position rather than one that prevailed in practice. A number of respondents conceded that whilst demonstration of both competence-based and reflective learning *should* be present within portfolios, it need not necessarily be for the portfolio to be assessed as of a pass standard. This appears to suggest an acknowledgement by these respondents that, in this instance at least, a lack of consistency exists between what Agyris and Schon (1974) have termed espoused theory, that is: 'this is what should happen' and theory in use, that is: 'this is what actually does happen' (see Chapter Seven: 'Espoused theory versus theory-in-use: making sense of inconsistency'). And in line with the Agyris and Schon schema, a range of 'action strategies' for explaining or reconciling this disparity were evident in responses. It was proposed, for instance, that a programme could perhaps usefully be more explicit as to the requirement for reflective learning to be evidenced and illustrated or that if a student has passed all other aspects of their practice learning then it somehow seems a pity that they should not achieve an overall assessment of pass. Effectively what these respondents are saying then is that assessment of practice learning is not in fact always predicated on the need for students to evidence both competence and reflection nor to demonstrate that they have engaged effectively with both competence-based and reflective learning during their practice learning.

Student perceptions in the main, across the three case studies, confirmed that it may be possible to be assessed as having passed practice learning opportunities on the basis of evidence that is largely or solely of a competence-based nature. This resonates with what Ixer (2003: 12) has termed 'expedient learning' – wherein students do what is necessary, but no more, to achieve a pass outcome. It is particularly interesting that student respondents should state this view without an apparent sense of compromise (i.e. without proposing explanatory or apologist action strategies) since this perhaps indicates that, unlike their educators, students do not always or necessarily hold an espoused position that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches should inform their educational experience in an integrated and balanced manner. Thus it may be that the student perspective on practice learning assessment represents a more accurate, or at least clearer, picture as to the 'truth' (Rowntree 1987) or 'culture' (Light and Cox 2001) of their qualifying social work programmes more widely.

The final area of findings in relation to practice learning assessment to be discussed may be seen as rather disturbing. Programme personnel respondents from each of the case studies stated that an absence of evidence of reflective capacity within student portfolios may constitute grounds for an assessment of failure of the period of practice learning. This is concerning because of the earlier identified problems inherent in assessment based on the main 'planks' of evidence within student portfolios: student accounts of practice learning episodes and practice teacher reports of observations. Collectively, these issues very much call into question the feasibility of reflective learning being explicitly evidenced alongside competence. It is also concerning that educator respondents (from Case Studies B and C) were prepared on the one hand to discuss entirely competence-based portfolios as possibly of a pass standard, yet on the other to suggest that lack of evidence of reflective learning by students may comprise a reason for them being assessed as failing. It is difficult to reconcile these seemingly inconsistent positions without suspecting that 'reflection' – or the perceived lack of this - may at times be used as a convenient 'catch all' i.e. as a general and non-specific criterion used to label equally general and non-specific unease on the part of assessors as to a student's readiness to pass the practice learning period. This is clearly a dubious position for any assessor to hold

since it implies the potential for injustice towards and oppression of students within the assessment process. As part of the allegedly transparent and empowering teaching, learning and assessment process that a competence-based framework is said to represent, students are simultaneously required to provide evidence of something that seems opaque and inevitably subjective. Ixer (1999: 521) is explicit in challenging an assessment requirement for evidence of reflection when he states:

> 'If reflection is to be regarded as a core facet of professional competence, then we need to know far more about its structure, substance and nature before we can safely assess it in professional social work training.'

Both Boud (1999:123) and Redmond (2006:142) extend this concern; Boud, by contending that 'there is a danger that assessment will obliterate the very practices of reflection' since 'the assessment procedure celebrates certainty while reflection thrives on doubt'; Redmond, by asserting the highly individual and 'idiosyncratic' nature of reflection which in and of itself militates against standardised assessment criteria.

From these observations it can be seen that assessment of the quality or sufficiency of reflection within student portfolios is not a straightforward matter. There is a fundamental difficulty in establishing clear, tangible and standard assessment benchmarks (Sumsion and Fleet 1996, Beveridge 1997, Rust 2002). Yet the requirement that assessment of practice learning is clearly related to the DipSW practice requirements and values (Sharp and Danbury 1999, Furness and Gilligan 2004) means that a concern regarding sufficiency of evidence of reflective capacity is likely to be mapped against those practice requirements that specify competent professional development. Thus the data appears to yield further indicators that reflective processes and capacity within the DipSW practice learning context are treated essentially as areas of competence (see earlier discussion in Chapter Six). Perhaps more seriously, the data suggests that reflective learning may become a dangerous tool in the hands of assessors who are unsure or uneasy about recommending pass outcomes for certain students. Not only does it appear extraordinarily difficult for students to adequately demonstrate something as nebulous and individual as

reflection, the absence of clear and agreed assessment standards for this means that reflection may become a useful peg on which assessors may hang their uncertainty or disquiet as to whether a student's performance merits a pass recommendation, and may thus be used to legitimise a fail recommendation.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section c. Evidence Needed to Pass Practice Learning)

- Programme preparation and guidance for practice learning:

It has been asserted that; 'to skimp on preparatory work is to set the placement at hazard' (Thompson, Osada and Anderson, 1994: 25). Clearly then this is a crucially important aspect of the agency-based practice learning experience for all students. Within each case study site, preparatory work with students in readiness for each of their assessed periods of practice learning was undertaken within the university setting.

In relation to whether both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches receive equal emphasis in the course of this preparation (or whether one receives a greater emphasis and, if so, which this is), programme personnel across the case studies were unanimous in stating that both approaches are emphasised to students as equally significant in the course of their practice learning. Student respondents, however, were less uniform, with differing views emerging. Whilst a minority of students felt that they had been encouraged to think in terms of reflective learning during their periods of agency-based practice learning, a clear majority student view was that the competence-based framework of assessed practice requirements had dominated the preparation for this aspect of their respective programmes. Perhaps a yet more striking finding was that practice teacher respondents, across each of the case study sites, were virtually unanimous in saying that they did not know what this preparation for practice learning entails and thus were unable to comment regarding any preparatory discussion as to competence-based and/or reflective learning approaches.

In seeking to understand this disparity in perception a range of potential explanations exist. It is possible that programme personnel respondents were talking about what they felt they ought to be doing rather than what they actually did. Thus a return occurs to the by now familiar refrain of difference – and potential dissonance – between espoused theories of social work teaching and learning and the actual theories in use that shape what takes place. Equally, it is possible that the relative transparency of the matrix of DipSW core competences and practice requirements that frame agency-based practice learning, in contrast with an apparent lack of clarity as to what comprises reflective learning (see Chapter Two: 'Origins and meanings of the reflective learning approach'), means that it is a competence-based focus that is most clearly and readily heard, grasped and remembered by students. Allied to this is the perceived problem of student preoccupation with the DipSW competences (see Chapter Six) which may explain the disparity in perception as to preparatory themes and emphasis between programme personnel educators and their student audience.

What emerges most clearly from the discussion with respondents as to the use that is made of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches as part of the preparation of students for practice learning, however, is a rather serious disjunction between the university and agency-based contexts, featuring in each of the case study sites. For practice teacher respondents to uniformly have little or no knowledge of the manner in which students are being prepared for practice learning within agencies is startling. An important aspect of this apparent gap is the fact that none of the practice teacher respondents had had experience of being involved with or contributing to this preparation of students. Thus an important partnership (or lack of) issue emerges (see Chapter Six: 'The competence-based approach and university-agency interaction'). This once again indicates that questions as to the relationship between the university and agency contexts are relevant to, or are at least a part of, understanding the nature of the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches in pre-qualifying social work programmes. Interestingly, Case Study B involved an agency-based programme personnel respondent who was directly involved in the preparation of students for practice learning. Although this respondent was clear in asserting that

students receive a message of the significance of dual and integrated use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, this message does not appear to have filtered through to the agency-based practice teachers 'on the ground' and this raises a question as to the efficacy of intra, i.e. within agency, relationships as well as those between agencies and universities.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section c. Emphases within Preparation for Practice Learning and Related Written Guidance)

As an alternative means of trying to gauge their views on the nature of the pre-placement work that is undertaken with students, practice teacher respondents were asked whether, in their experience, the students from the respective programmes had demonstrated an equal readiness to engage with each of the two approaches. Despite the programme personnel statements that both approaches are emphasised to students in advance of their practice learning, Case Study A and C practice teachers reported an apparently clear expectation of and preference for prioritising use of a competence-based approach on the part of students. For Case Study B, the practice teacher experience was more mixed with acknowledgement by some respondents that students appeared to have assimilated the significance of reflective learning in the course of their practice learning preparation. As with student respondent views, however, this was a minority perspective and the eagerness of students to 'fill in' or 'tick off' the competence-based practice requirements was commonly expressed by practice teachers across the case studies.

In describing their general experience of students with regard the two approaches, two common themes were expressed amongst practice teacher respondents from each of the case study sites. Firstly, that a competence-based focus by students was more usual (and, it was implied, understandable and permissible) during the first (50 day) of the two assessed DipSW placements and that it is more able students who demonstrate a capacity to engage equally with reflective learning at this stage. Secondly, that reflective learning is implicitly accepted as a more advanced form of student development which thus sits more readily within the second (80 day) period of practice learning.

The initial and most obvious conclusion that may be drawn from these findings is that the issue of time (see Chapter Seven: 'Time') is again being expressed as significant to the use of both competence-based and reflective learning. It would seem that practice teacher respondents may be indicating a belief that use of a reflective learning approach needs and takes a longer period of time and that this is manifested in the approach becoming more readily drawn upon during the longer of the two periods of practice learning. Secondly, practice teachers appeared to again be articulating a notion of foundational competence-based learning that is built upon and advanced through use of a reflective learning approach. Thus further possible support emerges for the notion of a staged model of professional learning and development that embodies, at its lower or earlier stages, the achievement of competence and also, as later and subsequent steps to be taken, the development of a more reflective capacity, albeit of a predominantly functional or technical nature, on the part of the learner. This potential interpretation of the DipSW by respondents has been discussed in more detail in the preceding chapter.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section c. Practice Teacher Perceptions of Student Preferences)

Practice teacher perspectives regarding the written guidance for agency-based practice learning produced by each programme again appeared to indicate a lack of engagement between university and agency bases. Respondents from each case study referred to this alternatively as emphasising the significance of both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches or as emphasising neither. No illustrations in support of these positions were offered, however, by Case Study B or C practice teachers. Case Study A respondents were similarly inconclusive regarding the emphasis within this guidance though the examples of the core competence framework and of information regarding student reflective commentaries were cited as indicative of a dual emphasis. This apparently rather vague sense overall of how written practice learning guidance supports or encourages use of the two approaches seems to suggest if not a lack of familiarity then certainly a lack of ownership by practice teachers. No respondents reported having been involved in the development of the guidance or having in any way otherwise shared in its production. Instead, the guidance appeared to be viewed and experienced as a university-

based document that sets out requirements for practice teachers and students alike rather than partnership-based material enshrining a shared perspective.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section c. Emphases within Preparation for Practice Learning and Related Written Guidance).

The University-based Context

A perhaps notable finding in itself is the way in which all respondents, and within each of the case study sites, referred initially to agency-based practice learning rather than the university-based context when discussing and illustrating their understanding and perceptions of competence-based and reflective learning. It was therefore important that respondents were asked directly for their views as to the two approaches within the university-based context specifically. Discussion focused upon teaching and learning and upon assessment:

- University-based teaching and learning:

All student and university-based programme personnel respondents from each of the case studies stated initially that joint use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches pervades all aspects of university-based teaching and learning. No practice teachers and only one agency-based programme personnel respondent said they had sufficient knowledge of the university-based curriculum or teaching and learning processes to comment. The one agency-based respondent who did feel able to comment observed that whilst they believed the university-based element to be characterised by joint and integrated use of the two approaches, they could not exemplify this due to insufficient knowledge.

Respondents were asked whether they would identify specific modules or areas of university-based teaching in which they saw either or both competence-based or reflective learning as particularly evident. Only one student from Case Study C provided

such illustration while other Case Study C respondents re-stated their view that the two approaches are used throughout the programme generally. Both Case Study A and B respondents and the single student respondent from Case Study C highlighted a module on working with children and families as embodying a particularly clear emphasis upon reflective learning. While Case Study A respondents referred also to a module on social work skills as involving use of a reflective learning approach, this was not mentioned within Case Study B (even though, when discussing assessments, this module was referred to as making substantial use of formative assessment through analysis of videoed role plays in which students sought to rehearse and demonstrate specific micro communication skills). Case Study B respondents also spoke of particular seminars on social work evaluation and reflection as being informed by a reflective learning approach and of a general module entitled 'Core Competences' as drawing upon both competence-based and reflective learning in combination.

Initially then, Barnett's (1992:99) description of higher education as a form of 'black box' within which it is not possible to discern or specify particular processes beyond '... a collection of intentional and unintentional happenings orientated toward changing the student in various ways' would seem to be upheld in that respondents appeared able to discuss university-based teaching and learning in only the most vague and general terms. When pressed to become more explicit, by means of more direct questioning, respondents did not extensively relate either the competence-based or the reflective learning approaches to the curriculum content for each programme laid out in Chapter Five. Interestingly, although both Case Study A and C programmes include modules with titles that refer quite explicitly to 'reflexive practice' or 'reflective practice', these did not appear to be recognised by either university staff or by students as potential examples of the use or experience of a reflective learning approach. Nor, it must be noted, did any respondents refer to specific projects such as those proposed by Ruch (2002), Dempsey *et al* (2001) or Clare (2007) (see Chapter Two: 'Origins and meanings of the reflective learning approach') as featuring within either their teaching or learning experience.

What was commonly held, however, amongst respondents from each case study site, was that teaching and learning regarding social work with children and families involves reflective learning. The rationale for this appeared to be that, within each case study, this teaching took the form of workshops rather than lectures and involved a variety of activities and experiences for learners. A survey undertaken for the purposes of the 1997 Dearing Report on UK higher education found that 98% of the students surveyed reported lectures as the sole or main teaching and learning method they encountered in the course of their study. It is possible that this was mirrored in the experiences of respondents from each of the case studies and that only those few modules or classes that adopted teaching methods other than lectures were readily connected with either approach or, certainly, associated with reflective learning. This suggests strongly that the primary emphasis within the respective university-based contexts was upon transmissional rather than transformational learning.

The learning experiences that were understood by respondents as aimed at promoting reflective learning were those which were seen to involve interaction and discourse amongst students and between students and tutors as opposed to the transmission of knowledge through instruction of students by tutors. This perception endorses the position taken by Redmond (2006: 144) who argues for the adoption of an approach to teaching 'providing a supportive structure that encourages experimentation, exploration and evaluation, all of which are central to personal and professional transformation.' In line with this, Harvey and Knight (1996) outline a range of principles for facilitating reflective learning including an emphasis on depth rather than breadth of learning, the use of a variety of teaching methods and the engagement of learners by means of a series of different tasks and activities each of which place the involvement of the student at its centre.

The use of these principles of, or strategies for, teaching would seem to explain the respondent view of certain areas of curriculum content as more indicative of the reflective learning approach. What was not explained was why these strategies were apparently limited to only a very few aspects of university-based teaching. Brockbank

and McGill (1998: 94) assert that it is all too common for the 'what', and even the 'why', of learning to be clearly specified yet the 'how' of this to somehow remain tacit:

> 'In much of the writing about learning in higher education there is clear attention to the nature of learning and what learning should be for in contemporary societies. However, there is often a holding back, which may not be intentional, about how such learning should be attained.'

This offers an explanation for the ability and readiness of respondents to articulate the content of university-based teaching but their comparative lack of clarity in expressing the process of this. Moreover, the initial statements by respondents to the effect that both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches thematically characterise the university-based aspect of each case study programme may be seen to represent an espoused position or belief which was not substantiated either by comprehensive illustration nor, largely, the ability to explain the processes involved in teaching and learning within the university-based context.

The finding that no agency-based programme personnel or practice teacher respondents felt they knew enough about the content or nature of student learning within the university-based context to be able to discuss this is striking. Furthermore, this builds upon the expressed lack of knowledge by these same respondents as to the university-based preparation of students for periods of practice learning that has been discussed above. For agency-based respondents, the university context appears to very much represent Barnett's (1992:99) notion of a 'black box' that accommodates obscure, even mysterious, processes that are not transparent or readily accessible. This lack of knowledge by agency-based respondents again raises the question, in the case of each of the programmes studied, of the effectiveness of the university-agency partnership in developing and operating a shared approach to teaching and learning. It is difficult, if not impossible, for practice teachers who know nothing of the learning undertaken by students within the university to refer to or in any way develop this. Similarly, if the agency-based programme personnel too have little or no such knowledge then their ability to familiarise practice teachers with the university-based content is fundamentally

compromised. Such an apparently stark absence of integration between university and agency contexts throws into question the coherence not only of the overall programmes but also their espoused integrated use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. And once again the nature of the relationship between university and agency bases is highlighted.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section d. University-based Teaching and Learning)

- University-based assessment:

Written assignments in the form of essays were seen by student and university-based programme personnel respondents from each case study as the major vehicle for assessment of student learning within the university context. Specific modules or courses such as law (all case study programmes) and social policy (Case Study A) were reported to be assessed by means of 'seen' or 'take home' examinations i.e. wherein the exam questions are available to students over a period of time in order that they may research the responses that they will then make under exam conditions or may complete the paper outside of these. Student presentations were cited as a further means of assessment within each of the case studies and analysis of videoed student role play was reported within Case Studies A and B.

A kind of logical coherence is evident in the use of lectures, aimed at transmitting knowledge, as the dominant approach to university-based teaching and learning and the use of essays, aimed at student presentation of their understanding of this knowledge. However, it was commonly agreed amongst student and university-based programme personnel respondents across the three case studies that the requirements and guidance accompanying essays emphasise the need for students to demonstrate reflective analysis and understanding in relation to their written discussion. It would seem then that the criteria and guidance for these assignments is informed by a more comprehensive perspective on reflective learning than simply, or mainly, the technical reflection that has been proposed as primarily typifying the agency-based practice learning process (see

Chapter Six). More practical and critical forms of reflection may also be required by university-based assessment processes. Interestingly, Case Study B student respondents perceived a clear relationship between their effective demonstration of reflection within essays and the attainment of distinction level grades. Once again then an association is posited between reflective understanding and a more advanced form of learning and development. Presumably, however, the same concerns as to how 'reflection' may be fairly and accurately assessed that have been discussed above in relation to agency-based practice learning, relate equally to university-based student learning.

What is less immediately evident is how such written assignments represent a form of assessment that is compatible with the other approaches reported by respondents as comprising part of the university-based repertoire of forms of teaching and learning. As seen above, respondents from each of the case studies referred to courses on social work with children and families as workshop-based. The teaching of courses on social work communication skills was described by Case Study A respondents as entailing the use of videoed student role play and by Case Study B respondents as involving formative feedback on similar videoed role play exercises. This raises the significant issue, with regard these particular courses, of how coherence is assured between the teaching and assessment methods used. Or, rather, the nature of the relationship between these. One approach to exploring this question is through consideration of the uses of and relationship between formative and summative modes of assessment.

An overt distinction between formative and summative assessment was drawn by Case Study B student respondents solely. This is perhaps surprising since the use of some type or measure of formative assessment is plainly a central feature of any approach to learning, certainly to reflective learning (Harlen and James 1997). Indeed, Light and Cox (2001: 170) define formative assessment in terms of 'enhancing learning'. Both Brown and Knight (1994) and Black (1999) distinguish summative and formative assessment by explaining them respectively as a means of making and describing an overall judgement as to attainment and a means of guiding learning on a day to day basis and as a precursor to final, summative assessment. This serves to underscore the essential significance of

formative assessment as part of the learning process. Any analysis of and feedback on students' demonstration of key communication skills and of performance in relation to workshop-based tasks and activities in the specific courses mentioned above would not only facilitate (reflective) learning in these areas but also constitute important formative assessment. Yet this was identified by a minority of respondents only. Harlen and James (1997) maintain that, within higher education generally, confusion over time has arisen with regard the purposes of formative and summative assessment. This, they argue, has led to a situation wherein learning processes fail to make effective use of formative feedback and assessments are inevitably of a summative nature, however ill-matched this may be to the content and process of the learning being assessed. This view is supported by the data from each of the case studies, two of which make no reference whatsoever to their use of formative assessment.

In what is now becoming a repetitive theme, practice learning agency-based respondents (with the exception of one Case Study B respondent) expressed a total lack of knowledge as to university-based assessment processes. This seems to further confirm not only the existence, within each of the case study programmes, of two parallel but essentially differentiated and separate spheres of teaching, learning and assessment but also a significant barrier to integrated and thematic use of competence-based and reflective learning throughout each of the programmes.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section d. University-based Assessment)

Origins and Outcomes: how programme cultures are formed and how these give rise to emerging professional identities

The particular blend of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches that is seen to typify each of the case study programmes may fairly be described as an essential element of programme culture. The sources, or origins, of this culture, together with its

outcomes in terms of the nature of the nascent professional identity held by students emerging as newly qualified social work practitioners, are now explored.

- The origins of programme cultures:

Fook and Askeland (2007: 522) define 'culture' as 'the embedded and often implicit or tacit beliefs about what is normal or acceptable behaviour or ideas in ... groups' and, further, as 'the preconceived ideas which are embedded in practices ...'. The particular culture of each of the case study programmes, as characterised by beliefs and ideas resulting in the emphasis that is placed upon the competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively, was confirmed as 'conscious' i.e. as deliberate, intended, and purposeful, by respondents across the case studies. However, while Case Studies B and C programme personnel respondents expressed consensus that the approaches are used in combination, within Case Study A no such shared view was evident. Programme personnel were at variance with one another as to which, if either, approach receives greater emphasis. It was confusing therefore that they should each see their particular perspective as a deliberately typifying programme feature.

In terms of how this apparently deliberate aspect of programme design has developed, Case Study A and C respondents cited the university-agency partnership as having been the major influence. Case Study B respondents, however, articulated no clear perception though it was noted that individual autonomy and scope exists within this programme to the extent that programme personnel may develop and pursue their different preferences in terms of competence-based and/or reflective learning. This seems to suggest that what is perceived as programme culture is very much in the eye of the beholder and this may therefore explain the apparent inconsistency within Case Study B wherein different respondents expressed different perceptions – but all agreed that these formed a conscious emphasis by the programme.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section e. Programme Emphasis – Intended outcomes or Unintended Consequences?)

The influence of university-agency partnerships, certainly within Case Studies A and C, appeared significant. Yet much of the preceding discussion has highlighted the apparently problematic partnership arrangements between university and agency bases. Some of the ways in which collaboration appears wanting – and emergent partnership arrangements thus undermined – that have been identified include a clear sense of different and separate arenas for student learning (i.e. agency and university) wherein not only is the competence-based approach seen as predominantly associated with agency-based practice learning, but, within Case Studies A and C, teaching and learning of social work theory is seen as university rather than the agency business (see Chapter Six: 'The competence-based approach and university-agency interaction' and 'Competence-based learning and the use of knowledge'). Also, the repeated finding of a lack of knowledge or involvement on the part of agency-based practice teachers and programme personnel, concerning university-based teaching, learning and assessment generally and preparation for practice learning specifically, strongly suggests a corresponding lack of collaborative partnership working. Hence a major contradiction is evident between an expressed sense of mutually informing collaboration and partnership on the one hand, yet very limited evidence of this and even indications to the contrary on the other. This, of course, once again draws attention to the nature of the university-agency relationship.

It has been established that different understandings of what constitutes knowledge and how this may be learned, arising from different organisational cultures, characterises many higher education programmes that are provided jointly between employing agencies and universities (e.g. Reeve and Gallacher 2005). While much has been written regarding collaboration and partnership between social work and other professional disciplines and agencies in service development and delivery (e.g. Farmakopoulou 2002, Buchanan and Carnwell 2005, Lymbery 2006, Quinney 2006, Payne 2007), there is markedly little published research regarding this same form of 'joined up' working between universities and employing social work agencies in social work education. This is all the more notable in view of the DipSW mandate for such collaboration (CCETSW 1995) (see Chapter Six: 'The competence-based approach and university-agency interaction').

In the absence of a distinct body of work that is explicitly concerned to explore university-agency collaboration and partnership in the provision of qualifying social work programmes, it is useful nonetheless to consider certain of the themes arising from research that has considered partnership between organisations in the provision of social care since certain parallels exist. Within this context, Carnwell and Carson (2005:6) propose that collaborative working is 'a shared commitment, where all partners have a right and obligation to participate and will be affected equally by the benefits and disadvantages arising from the partnership.' The notion of agreed and shared goals is also seen as central to a mode of working wherein different and separate organisations come together in pursuit of a specific outcome (Lupton and Nixon 1999, Glendinning 2002). Notwithstanding such common purpose, however, Newman (2001:109) observes that styles of inter-organisational partnership working may 'range from loose networks to more stable groupings with defined structures and protocols' and, further, that relationships within the exercise may range 'from formal processes to more elusive processes.' And to qualify, or even cloud, further the question of precisely how effective collaboration between organisations may be understood, Huxham (2000) has argued that terms such as 'collaboration' and 'partnership' mean very much - and no more than - what those involved believe them to mean while Glasby (2007) maintains that effective inter-organisational partnership is very difficult to measure. It is perhaps this ambiguity that has led McDonald (2005:581) to conclude that the rhetoric of effective collaboration and partnership may rest largely in the realms of espoused but unsubstantiated belief and that 'there is a veritable chasm between the ideals of efficiency, effectiveness and inclusiveness and the reality of partnership working in contemporary social policy.'

The above observations may be related directly to the findings from each of the case studies in that, despite the repeatedly professed sense of a university-agency shared goal and mutually informing and guiding set of influences, there appears to be a distinctly elusive quality to this and a seeming chasm between what is claimed and what occurs. This is demonstrated by a belief in the existence of collaborative forces that shape programme duality of emphasis on the competence-based and reflective approaches on

the one hand, yet a repeated undermining of this through evidence of areas of knowledge and responsibility that appear discrete and unshared on the other.

Further research is needed in this area since the positions espoused by respondents across the case studies regarding the significance of 'partnership' arrangements do not appear to be borne out in the reality of their experience. This is problematic because as long as refuge can be sought in some kind of generalised and non-specific belief that partnership not only exists but has responsibility for the development and direction of social work learning then no real responsibility needs to be taken by any party in the supposedly collaborative arrangement. Thus an aspect of partnership working that may even be seen as collusive rather than elusive emerges. The concept of partnership thus becomes a convenient but potentially dangerous smokescreen that, whilst held up as a clear rationale for the way in which programmes operate, in fact obscures the why and the how of what really happens. It is argued that such a situation has been demonstrated within this research since no clear relationship between the origins of the respective programme cultures and their partnership arrangements are discernible. This has been either because the source of the way a programme operates simply cannot be identified by programme respondents (Case Study B) or because the university-agency partnerships that are claimed to have determined these origins do not appear substantiated (Case Studies A and C).

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section e. Origins of Programme Emphasis)

- Outcomes - emerging professional identities:

The form of output or outcome arising from the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, that is to say the kind of emergent professional social work identity that each tends towards, was typified by respondents within each of the case studies very much in terms of the characteristics associated with the technical rational and professional artistry identities outlined by Fish and Coles (2000). In addition, echoes of the identity typologies developed by Clark (1995) and by Davies (2000) and also discussed in Chapter Three

(see 'The transformation of professionalism') may be recognised in respondent perceptions.

Respondents made clear links between the competence-based approach to learning and a predominantly technical rational form of identity. Exclusive or predominant use of the competence-based approach within qualifying social work programmes was seen as giving rise to a systematic and methodical yet bureaucratic and overly proceduralised approach to the social work role. This, for example, resonates with Clark's (1995) notion of professional competence, as opposed to professional discipline. Furthermore, too great an emphasis upon competence-based learning was expressed by respondents as leading to a very basic or beginning form of social work identity only. This was referred to throughout the case studies as firstly a compliant identity - one that does not involve a questioning or critical dimension. Secondly, respondents suggested this to be a potentially dangerous identity - one that fails to recognise the complexity of human need and welfare issues and, in oversimplifying situations, may overlook important aspects of these. Ultimately, respondents proposed this as an inadequate identity, as one that lacks characteristics of reflection and thus is not only insufficient for the purposes of social work but cannot be truly understood as 'professional'.

Equally, explicit connections were made - again, by respondents from each of the three case studies - between the use of reflective learning during pre-qualifying preparation for social work and an emergent form of identity involving the traits of professional artistry. An emphasis upon reflective learning was seen as giving rise to: a questioning, critical and even challenging identity; an identity which embraces a range of forms of social work knowledge and, in so doing, offers not only a more comprehensive and thorough approach in general terms but also a specific awareness of and concern with structural issues; an identity which prizes ongoing learning and development and, as a result of these characteristics, an identity that entails independence and assertiveness and one that may be considered 'professional'. Interestingly, a distinction was clearly drawn, for the first time, between reflective learning and reflective practice by some respondents. Reflective learning was discussed as a necessary precursor to reflective practice as a

defining characteristic of a professional artistry form of social work identity. A further interesting aspect of discussion by respondents from each case study of this type of identity was that, again for the first time, the question of values arose. This is considered further below.

Neither form of identity in a pure or extreme form was seen as desirable by respondents since each was seen to encompass certain drawbacks. As indicated above, a more technical rational social work approach, deriving from a pre-qualifying emphasis upon competence-based learning, was seen as fundamentally limited. A professional artistry identity, emanating from a pre-qualifying emphasis upon reflective learning was also seen as potentially embodying certain limitations which appeared, once more, to be related to the perception of reflection as a time-consuming process (see Chapter Seven: 'Time'). It was suggested by Case Study A and C respondents that a social work practitioner working from a professional artistry identity would be able to work less swiftly than their more technical rational-orientated colleagues and possibly be dependent on these for procedural guidance. It was also felt that such a practitioner would not fare well or operate effectively in a busy and pressurised working environment. It would appear then that, just as effective social work education has been espoused by respondents to embody a balanced use of both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches; the 'ideal' professional social work identity is seen as incorporating a blend of technical rational and professional artistry characteristics. Or, as Lymbery and Butler (2004) have argued, a balanced appreciation of and ability regarding both technicality and indeterminacy in the social work role.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section f. Competence-based and Reflective Learning and Professional Identity)

Programme personnel respondents across each of the case studies were in agreement that the cultures of their respective programme partnership arrangements valued and sought to inculcate in students a professional social work identity involving both technical rational and professional artistry traits. Notwithstanding their previously discussed variance in

perception as to programme culture, Case Study B programme personnel respondents endorsed this view.

Practice teacher respondents throughout the case studies told a rather different story, however. Of the thirteen practice teachers interviewed overall, seven stated the view that employing agencies prefer predominantly competence-based, technical rational social work practitioners. Four stated that employers prefer practitioners whose pre-qualifying development has been informed by both competence-based and reflective learning and who accordingly demonstrate a mixed and balanced identity (though one of these respondents suggested a slight inclination on the part of employers towards practitioners who have been more exposed to a reflective learning approach). One practice teacher said that the nature of identity preferred by an employer will be contingent upon the type of post in question and one perceived employer preference in terms of reflective learning and professional artistry identity traits. These responses came from respondents within each of the case studies and thus no clear correlation between practice teacher perception and programme is evident. Responses to how, if at all, perception of employer preference influenced the approach taken to practice teaching were equally varied and non case study-specific. Some respondents asserted that they see it as important to ensure students have the time and space they view as necessary for reflective learning yet others stated that it is important not to do this in order that students understand and are prepared for the absence of time and space for reflective thinking in the workplace. In essence, exposure of students to reflective learning was perceived as desirable rather than essential. A rather different light is cast then on each of the programme cultures and the significance of intra-organisation as well as inter-organisation relationships is revealed.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section f. Employer Preferences)

Writing of social work values, Clark (2000: 25) proposes: 'Like love in the song, values are everywhere'. But not in the findings from these three case studies. As indicated above, no respondents referred to the place or use of social work values in the qualifying social work programmes with which they were involved. This is a very notable absence

indeed since, as Clark (2005: 25) points out 'The 'values' of social work are staple fare in basic textbooks'. The DipSW Rules and Requirements (1995:17) are unequivocal in requiring student evidence of the 'integration of values' throughout their pre-qualifying learning. Yet social work values appeared to come to mind only for educator respondents (across the three case studies) and only in relation to the type of professional identity that they saw reflective learning as promoting. This is difficult to comprehend but a possible explanation is that the DipSW values had become somehow subsumed within the DipSW competences - or had perhaps become perceived as additional practice requirements - in the minds of respondents. Whatever the reason, the lack of reference to values by respondents in interpreting the competence-based and reflective learning approaches would seem to indicate a significant question as to the relationship between the teaching and learning of prescribed social work values and the rest of the curriculum.

Summary

In summary, this chapter has examined findings in relation to specific aspects of the agency-based and the university contexts of each of the three case study programmes. The assessment of practice learning has been considered and it has been proposed that this is essentially of a competence-based nature. This is notwithstanding the espoused belief, amongst educator respondents, that practice learning assessment embodies and is a prime illustration of dual use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. It is suggested that little more than technical or functional reflection is required of students for them to be assessed as successful. Also, that although reflective development is inevitably a highly individual matter and something that is notoriously difficult to assess in any standardised way, there is a potential risk that students may be assessed as having failed the period of practice learning because of what may be perceived as their inadequate evidence of reflection. Data relating to the preparation and guidance of students for practice learning has also been discussed and here, a marked absence of collaboration between the university and agency bases has been highlighted.

University-based teaching and learning, has been proposed as predominantly transmissional, despite a commonly espoused position amongst university-based programme personnel that both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches may be discerned within this. In terms of university-based assessment, key questions have been identified as to the relationship between formative and summative assessment and, yet again, the relationship between university and agency partners. The issue of this last relationship is also raised in relation to how university and agency partners collaborate towards the end of a commonly agreed and pursued programme culture.

Finally, the forms of professional identity that may be seen as born of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches have been explored. The findings show that, across the case studies, respondents linked the technical rational and professional artistry forms of identity with the competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively. Despite the expressed misgivings as to the value and appropriateness of a primarily technical rational form of social work identity, however, the findings referred to throughout this chapter appear to indicate a dominance of competence-based teaching, learning and assessment within both university-based and agency-based practice learning contexts. In Preston-Shoot's (2000: 88) terms, the view that 'Students must be ready for, not critical of, practice' appears to prevail.

To conclude, the issue of the significance of a series of linked relationships, which collectively comprise the context of the issue of the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches has again come to the fore: the relationships between different forms of reflection; between reflective learning and assessment; between formative and summative assessment; between the development of the DipSW values and the rest of the DipSW curriculum and, as twin overriding themes, between the university and agency bases and between what is espoused and carried out, are each highlighted within this chapter.

Chapter Nine: Concluding Thoughts

Introduction

This concluding chapter looks briefly at the introduction of the new social work award and respondent perceptions in relation to this. The key analytic themes arising from the data are then reviewed as are both the limitations and the potential of this research study.

Looking forward - the social work degree:

Each of the interviews within each of the case studies concluded with a brief discussion of respondent views regarding the use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the (then forthcoming) new social work degree. These findings have not been considered within the three preceding analytic discussion chapters as they arose in what was more an endnote to the interviews, and a way of drawing these to a close, than a purposeful focus. Nevertheless, interesting data emerges. All respondents - without exception - asserted the need for both approaches to learning to characterise the new social work award. The competence-based approach was associated with clarity as to the required content of teaching and learning for qualified social work and this was something that respondents perceived as of value and were keen not to lose. A greater emphasis upon reflective learning than had been experienced within the DipSW was also seen as desirable, however. Concern was also expressed, however, that opportunities for such an increased emphasis may become eclipsed through the introduction of the National Occupational Standards in the form of a yet more extensive and complex competence-based framework.

(For data relating to the above discussion see Chapter Five: Interview Findings, Section g. Preferences as Use within the New Degree)

The incorporation within the new degree of more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning was proposed as a potentially important means of ensuring balanced use of the two approaches. This echoed some of the earlier findings regarding respondent

views as to how enhanced dual use of the two approaches might be facilitated: more extensive agency-based practice learning and more formal observations of student practice learning had been suggested. Interestingly, these proposals have in fact become enshrined within the new degree arrangements – a minimum of 200 days agency-based practice learning (as compared to 130 days within the DipSW) is now required for attainment of a social work degree at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Department of Health 2002). Furthermore, the scope exists for increased observed practices. In Wales, for example, a minimum of twelve observed practices throughout the student practice learning (as compared to six within the DipSW) are now required (CCW 2005).

These, and other of the developments advanced as part of the new degree, have led to optimism on the part of some commentators (Eadie and Lymbery 2007, Harris and Gill 2007) that the new degree heralds the potential for a break with some of the more negative influences of a heavily competence-based thrust and for more creativity within social work education. It is certainly the case that the minimum academic requirement for attainment of the social work qualification is now set at degree rather than diploma level. This, together with the accompanying subject benchmark statements (QAA 2000), means that higher levels of academic performance than previously are now a standard prerequisite for qualified social work. It must be remembered, however, that the provision of social work education at degree level is by no means a new departure. Case Studies A and B bear testimony to this in that within the former, students were studying for the DipSW within the context of a social science degree and within the latter the DipSW was being prepared for as part of a Masters degree in social work. These levels of higher education experience did not, however, appear to mitigate the ambivalence as to the extent of reflective learning engaged with by students that was expressed by respondents. Moreover, what remains to be seen is the extent to which the requirement, enshrined within Key Role 5 of the National Occupational Standards, that both social work learners and practitioners demonstrate and deploy a more 'research minded' approach to social work (McLaughlin 2007) is realised. The lack of association expressed by respondents between competence based upon evidence on the one hand and evidence-

based practice on the other suggested a largely deductive and possibly uncritical approach within the DipSW to the use of knowledge (see Chapter Six – 'Competence-based learning and the use of knowledge'). This stands in contrast to the current imperative, deriving from the social work degree, that social workers should be more research orientated than previously and as part of this should 'be in a continuous reflective relationship with their practice seeking to find evidence and answers that help them to identify whether their intervention is effective or merely interference.' (McLaughlin 2007:1).

Furthermore, within the context of agency-based practice learning, more may not necessarily mean better. As Doel, Deacon and Sawdon (2007:223) note: 'The requirements for social work education and training may have changed but, for many, the context of practice learning has not.' It remains far from certain that competence-based domination will not continue to characterise this sphere of social work learning. Two examples of the way in which the new degree has been implemented are relevant to this concern. Firstly, in Wales the arrangements for the new degree are enshrined within a set of rules and requirements that has taken the six key roles comprising the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social work, disaggregated the constituent 21 units, comprising a total of 77 elements, and mapped these against a three-level framework (CCW 2005). The 200 days of practice learning are broken down into three level-specific practice learning opportunities spanning 20, 80 and 100 days respectively. In the course of these, social work students must not only verifiably demonstrate those NOS elements relevant to the particular level but must also continue to demonstrate those mapped against earlier levels. At level three then, each of the 77 NOS elements must be addressed. In addition, some programmes may require that each element, within each level, is evidenced more than once by students. What this means is that students studying for the new social work award are faced with a large and potentially cumbersome raft of competence-based requirements that carries an inevitable risk and implication of little more than a technical response to it.

In England - as a second example - practice learning arrangements are less standardised in that a variety of patterns (number of days for each opportunity) exist (Doel *et al* 2007). Common to these, however, is the absence of any requirement that students be taught and assessed by a social work practice teacher (GSCC 2002). Instead, this role is undertaken by a 'workplace assessor' who need not be a qualified social worker. This poses a risk that the student experience of, and emphasis within, practice learning will revolve around the development of practical skills in relation to competence-based tasks, without recourse to teaching and learning opportunities regarding reflective professionalism in social work (Harris and Gill 2007).

These illustrations demonstrate that the restructuring alone of the social work qualification, and, even, the more firm location of it within a higher education context, may be far from sufficient for the achievement of a more balanced relationship between competence-based and reflective learning, permeating preparation for social work. Unless the ambivalence regarding this relationship, as expressed throughout the case studies comprising this research, is more effectively addressed then it cannot safely be supposed that the introduction of the new social work degree will resolve matters. This ambivalence is now revisited below.

Looking back at the research:

- Contextual issues:

Each of the three case studies commenced with background discussion with key informants and an observation of a final year group student tutorial. As outlined in Chapter Four, this was aimed at information gathering regarding each programme, rather than data collection and to provide a backcloth of understanding against which to situate the interviews undertaken. During this initial phase, and within each case study site, apparent themes of uncertainty and ambivalence emerged in relation to the use of competence-based and reflective learning. Within Case Study A, for instance, one key

informant strongly asserted the need for the programme to draw on the approaches equally, whilst also stating that the agency-based practice learning component of the programme was seen as its most important. The other Case Study A key informant noted that while university-based learning was primarily characterised by a reflective learning approach, practice learning was formulated predominantly in terms of the DipSW competence-based practice requirements. Taken together then, these discussions appeared to indicate overall primacy of the competence-based approach. The observation within this case study revealed some students expressing their experience of transmissional learning via lectures as more accessible and the one student who indicated a preference for a different learning style receiving no response. Although these were final year students, each was hesitant and needed considerable prompting before articulating a sense of individual learning style and all were far more ready to discuss their learning in terms of the DipSW competences.

Similar themes were evident within Case Study B wherein key informants again discussed practice learning in terms of the competence-based approach and university-based learning as of a more reflective nature. While the Case Study B observed tutorial seemed to include a number of opportunities for reflective discussion, these openings by students were not taken up by the tutor but, rather, were closed down by an apparent emphasis upon ensuring that each student provided a brief description of their practice learning activity. Case Study C seemed perhaps to indicate more consistency in that balanced use of competence-based and reflective learning throughout the programme was expressed by the key informant and the observed tutorial appeared to embody a reflective emphasis. Once again, however, uncertainty regarding the meaning and purpose of reflection was demonstrated by final year students, about to qualify.

- Main themes emerging from the research findings:

The interview findings emerge as consistent with this backdrop of ambivalence. This is captured throughout the ensuing analytic discussion, in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, in terms of a range and series of additional relationships that seem to form the context of the

central research focus upon the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the DipSW. Chapter Six discussed the significance of the relationship between teaching and learning measures and assessment; the potential disharmony in the relationship between the concepts of education and training; the emergence of apparent distance in the university-agency relationship and the age-old question of the relationship between social work theory and practice. Each of these relationship themes were discerned through analytic consideration of respondents' understandings and definitions of competence-based learning. Respondent perceptions of reflective learning gave rise to further apparent forms of relationship: that between critical and functional analysis, between reflective practice and reflective learning and between different forms or reflective thought. Chapter Seven considered the intra-relations within a single model of staged professional development, particularly the relations between foundational and more advanced levels of learning. A fundamental question as to the relationship between the espoused theory of educators and their theory-in-use was also identified. In Chapter Eight, in addition to some of the previously outlined relationship themes, the relationships between reflective learning and assessment and between formative and summative assessment were considered. This chapter also outlined the relationships, as expressed by respondents, between competence-based learning and a technical rational professional identity on one hand and between reflective learning and a professional identity characterised by artistry on the other.

Put simply, the answer to the central research enquiry into the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the DipSW appears to be that a series of contextual relationships that derive from and characterise these approaches, and attempts to harmonise them, must be explored and taken account of. What has also become apparent is that the way in which the respective approaches are drawn upon and related during pre-qualifying social work preparation will have a crucial and fundamental influence upon the identity of the emergent social work professional.

It emerges that the relationship between these approaches to learning is not to be understood simply or merely in terms of a need to manage and limit use of one approach

or to extend use of the other. The relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches has been located within a complex web and series of other dynamics each of which need to be explored and examined if a balancing of the equation is to be achieved.

Limitations of the research

Many writers in the area of research design and methodology have observed that any research exercise involves, almost inevitably, some form of trade off between the desirable and the feasible (Bell 1999, Bryman 2004, Gilbert 2008). This research represents no exception to this maxim. The focus upon the DipSW within England and Wales is a key limitation since it means that DipSW programmes in Scotland and Northern Ireland have gone unconsidered. What would have been desirable would have been to undertake case studies of DipSW programmes in each of the four UK countries; what was feasible, however, was to carry out the research within an area of reasonable geographical proximity. Similarly, the decision to concentrate on pre-qualifying preparation for social work means that educational emphases within post qualifying development opportunities and arrangements have not been explored. Once again, this would have been desirable but is a limitation that has arisen directly from what was feasible. A specific area that could - and perhaps should - have been more vigorously pursued within the research is the way in which social work values are taught, learned about and demonstrated within the DipSW. The absence of reference to the DipSW values, or to the social work value base more widely, by respondents when explaining and illustrating their experience is striking and merits further enquiry.

Potential of the research

Notwithstanding these limitations, this research is proposed as holding important potential in a number of areas. At the time that the data collection was undertaken, two

out of the three case study programmes were actively developing new programmes in response to the introduction of the new degree. The opportunity afforded by the interviews for focused review and consideration of the educational practices typifying the DipSW was reported by many respondents as an invaluable means of thinking beyond programme approval and validation criteria, for example, and enabled timely reappraisal that was of benefit to the development of and planning for the new programmes.

On a personal note, I have not only learned much from the experience of conducting a piece of research but have benefited from deepened insight as to the implications of both competence-based and reflective learning for student social workers. Moreover, a salutary lesson regarding the ease with which beliefs and positions regarding social work education may be espoused, but which do not bear close scrutiny has been taken from this research experience.

Finally, the research findings and analysis have identified several future lines of enquiry. University-agency relations, for example, have emerged as a highly significant yet relatively under-researched aspect of social work education that warrants further research. The association between educational emphases and ensuing modes of professional identity is a further area for future enquiry – the professional standing and character of social work has been considered extensively by research and literature to date yet surprisingly little of this has directly and explicitly examined the implications of the experience of pre-qualifying preparation for eventual professional identity. These areas are illustrative of specific further research that may usefully be carried out. Overall, however, each of the sets of relations identified as informing the relationship between competence-based and reflective learning developmental approaches within the DipSW and, crucially, the interplay between these merit further enquiry. It is the recognition of the significance of these relationships and dynamics for social work education that is offered as the contribution of this thesis.

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APPENDIX I

Request for Research Access to XXXX University DipSW Programme

This research is being carried out as part of a PhD programme of study currently being undertaken within the School of Care Sciences at the University of Glamorgan. My interest in the topic area comes from my previous work as a tutor on a Diploma in Social Work programme and also my work as an off site practice teacher with social work students.

Research Focus:

The relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the Diploma in Social Work. The research seeks to explore whether and how simultaneous use is made of these educational approaches within DipSW programmes from the perspectives of Level II students, practice teachers and university and agency-based personnel.

Research Design:

A case study research design is adopted and will be used to consider three different DipSW programmes, each embodying the common themes of the CCETSW rules and requirements but being offered within different contexts. So:
Case Study A - the DipSW as part of an existing social work degree
Case Study B - the DipSW as part of a postgraduate programme
Case Study C - the DipSW as a free-standing diploma programme.

Methods:

Within each case study, semi-structured individual interviews will be undertaken with up to six volunteers from each of three respondent groups: final year students, practice teachers with experience of working with final year students and programme personnel (university tutors and agency-based colleagues).
An observation of university/student contact - for example a student group tutorial meeting – and discussions with key informants will also be carried out. These will be for the purpose of familiarising the researcher with the programme.

Time Scale:

It is intended that the XXXX case study will be undertaken during XXXX 2003.

Teresa de Villiers.

For further information about the project, please contact:
Teresa de Villiers, Postgraduate student, University of Glamorgan, School of Care Sciences, Pontypridd CF37 1DL, Tel: 02920 233721, email: tdevilli@glam.ac.uk
Professor Ruth Northway (Director of Studies), University of Glamorgan, School of Care Sciences, Pontypridd CF37 1DL, Tel: 01443 483177, email: rnorthwa@glam.ac.u

APPENDIX II

INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT: The Relationship between Competence-based and Reflective Learning Approaches to Education within the Diploma in Social Work.

WHY IS THE RESEARCH TAKING PLACE? This research is being carried out as part of a PhD programme of study currently being undertaken within the School of Care Sciences at the University of Glamorgan. My interest in the topic area comes from my previous work as a tutor on a Diploma in Social Work programme and also my work as an off site practice teacher with social work students.

WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH LOOK AT? Three different Diploma in Social Work programmes are being looked at. In each case this will involve semi-structured interviews with three groups:

- Level II Students (individual interviews)
- Practice Teachers of Level II students (individual interviews)
- Programme personnel such as university tutors and agency members of the Practice Assessment Panels and Programme Management Committees (individual interviews).

Observation of student group tutorial meetings will be undertaken and discussion with a small number of people who are very familiar with the programme. This will be to help the researcher develop general understanding of the programme.

WHAT WOULD I NEED TO DO TO TAKE PART? If you are willing to act as a participant, please complete the attached sheet that asks for your contact details. At an initial contact, the researcher will advise of the arrangements for returning these. When you have returned your contact details the researcher will contact you to arrange the interview.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART? Participation is entirely voluntary. You will be free to withdraw from the research at any point and would not need to give any reason for this.

AM I LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE ANY DISCOMFORT IF I TAKE PART? Arrangements for interviews will be negotiated with participants to ensure minimum inconvenience. It is anticipated that no interview will exceed one hour. There is no link of any kind between your participation in this research and your progress on or role in relation to the programme with which you are involved.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO WHAT YOU FIND OUT? The information collected will be used as part of a PhD thesis that will eventually be available to the public. It is possible also that some information may be used by the researcher in the development of papers for conference presentation or for publication. However, all information will be strictly anonymised to ensure that it is not attributable to any individual or University.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY? All information is anonymous and will only be used for the purposes of the research unless issues are raised which contravene Programme Regulations. In this event you will be advised that the information will be given to the Programme Director. Although you are asked to sign a Consent Form, these will be kept separate from all other information to ensure that no participant is identifiable by name.

FURTHER INFORMATION/CONTACT DETAILS:

If you have any questions or would like further details about the research project, please contact:

Teresa de Villiers, Postgraduate student, University of Glamorgan, School of Care Sciences, Pontypridd CF37 1DL, Tel: 02920 233721, email: tdevilli@glam.ac.uk
Professor Ruth Northway (Director of Studies), University of Glamorgan, School of Care Sciences, Pontypridd CF37 1DL, Tel: 01443 483177, email: rnorthwa@glam.ac.uk

APPENDIX III

CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH: The Relationship between Competence-based and Reflective Learning Approaches to Education within the Diploma in Social Work

Name of Participant .....

I confirm that I consent to take part in the above research project. I have read, had the opportunity to discuss and understand the information sheet outlining the nature and the purpose of the project.

I understand that

- My participation is entirely voluntary
- I am free to refuse to answer any question
- I am free to withdraw at any time and do not have to give a reason.
- The decision whether or not to participate or to withdraw will in no way affect my progress on or role in relation to this DipSW programme.
- The interview will be audiotaped
- All information is anonymous and will only be used for the purposes of the research unless issues are raised which contravene Course Regulations. In this event I will be advised that the information will be given to the Course Director.

I have read the contents of this form and am willing to take part in the project.

Signed .....
Name (please print) ..... **Date** .....

Statement by researcher
I have provided the above named participant with information about the nature and the purpose of this research project and the opportunity to ask any questions.

Signed ..... **Date** .....

For further information about the project, please contact:
Teresa de Villiers, Postgraduate student, University of Glamorgan, School of Care Sciences, Pontypridd CF37 1DL, Tel: 02920 233721, email: tdevilli@glam.ac.uk
Professor Ruth Northway (Director of Studies), University of Glamorgan, School of Care Sciences, Pontypridd CF37 1DL, Tel: 01443 483177, email: rnorthwa@glam.ac.uk

APPENDIX IV

EXAMPLE OF TOPIC GUIDE FOR SEMI -STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Opening/rapport building questions:

- How long have you been involved with this programme?
- What is your role in relation to this programme
- Is this something that has changed over the course of your involvement with the programme?

- What do you understand by the 'Competence-based' educational approach in social work education?

Associated ideas/imagery?

- Can you illustrate this at all with reference to this particular programme?

Anything your involved with that reminds you of this?

- What do you understand by the 'Reflective Learning' educational approach in social work education?

Associated ideas/imagery?

- Again, examples from this programme?

Anything your involved with that reminds you of this?

- Do you feel that one of these approaches is more in evidence on this programme than the other?

If so, which is the approach that you think is used most?

- What would you draw on in support of this view?

Examples of what makes you think this?

- Do you think that the Competence-based and the Reflective Learning approaches/models can work alongside one another?

Sense of integrated use?

- If so, can you think of any illustrations from your course where you feel you have seen this happening?

Examples of what makes you think this?

- Is there anything that you think might help/promote joint use of the two approaches?

- Would you see there being any contradiction or conflict between the two approaches?

Any sense of mismatch?

- Again, can you illustrate this with reference to your experience of this programme?

Examples of what makes you think this?

- Are there any particular areas of this programme where you would identify either or both of the Competence-based and the Reflective Learning approaches as particularly informing the way that the teaching is delivered?

Any particular modules, for example?

- If so, how would you explain this?

- Thinking now about assignments, can you tell me if these come in different forms on this programme and what these are?

- Do you feel that the guidance in relation to university- based assignments contains elements of either or both the Competence-based and/or Reflective Learning approaches?

  Can you illustrate this?

- Would you say that the emphasis within this programme upon either the Competence-based or Reflective Learning approaches (or a mixture) is a conscious feature of the programme design?

Is this something that you feel people are aware of?

- If so, can you tell me a little about how this has been negotiated and developed over time?

- If not, how would you say the emphasis has come about?

- Would you say that the emphasis within this programme upon either – or a mixture – of the two approaches is explicit?

  If so, where and how is this aspect of the programme design written and/or spoken of?

- In terms of practice learning, what elements of either or both of the Competence-based and/or Reflective Learning approaches would you identify in the requirements for a pass recommendation?

- Do you feel that the preparation for students going on placement particularly emphasises either of the approaches?

  - Can you say how?

  - What do you think would be the characteristics – or identity – of a social worker whose education had been primarily Competence-based?

  - Primarily involved Reflective Learning?

  What would practitioners look like? How would they be?

- Looking towards the introduction of the new social work degree, can you tell me about the planning and preparations being undertaken in relation to this course?

- Have you been involved in this?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.
Out of interest, what do you think the new social work degree should look like in terms of use of the Competence-based and Reflective Learning approaches?

Is there any further aspect of the research topic on which you would like to comment?

APPENDIX V

CASE STUDY A REPORT

Introduction:

Programme A is a 4-year full time course of study leading to the award of BSc (Hons) in Social Policy and Social Work and the DipSW. In compiling this case study, two key informant sources were drawn upon to provide contextual information about this programme. Both had been involved with this programme for more than five years. Individual interviews were undertaken with: four programme personnel (one agency-based/three university-based), all of whom had been involved with this programme for more than four years; five practice teachers, all of whom worked solely with this programme and had done so for between three and ten years and who had also successfully undertaken the Practice Teaching Award[1]; and three students, each of whom were in the final year of this programme and presently mid-way through their 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. One observation was undertaken involving a university-based tutor (not also interviewed) and five third year students (none of whom were also interviewed). All participants volunteered to be involved in the research exercise following contact with and invitations from the researcher.

Within this region of the UK, Programme A is one of four social work qualifying programmes offered by different Higher Education institutions. The other programmes within the geographical region are two 2-year DipSW programmes and one 2-year Masters level programme that encompasses the DipSW. Thus Programme A represents the only regional opportunity for undergraduate degree level study encompassing the DipSW award. It is offered on the basis of an arrangement between this university and

[1] This was introduced in 1989 as a CCETSW (subsequently replaced by the General Social Care Council in England and by Care Councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) award. The award is managed and delivered through regional consortia and is for social work qualification holders with at least two years' post qualifying experience of social work. The award training programmes address six key aspects of the practice teacher role: supervisory relationships and skills in supervision, management of the period of practice learning, assessment, the social work value base, critical reflection and professional development.

several different neighbouring Local Authorities that have agreed to provide agency-based practice learning opportunities to programme students.

This university has a long tradition, spanning more than twenty five years, of offering qualifying social work education. Programme A is located within a School of Social Sciences as one of a range of social science degree courses. It is the only vocational programme leading to a specific professional qualification within the School. Programme A - as the most recent manifestation of the social work courses offered by this university - was validated in 1996 for a maximum of 50 students per intake. However, a consistent student drop out rate of around 10% means that commonly 35-40 students graduate annually.

The aim of Programme A is stated in the programme handbook as being 'to produce graduates who are accountable, reflective and self-critical practitioners.' In terms of teaching and learning processes, four 'inter-related themes' are highlighted in the programme handbook. These are listed as Awareness raising and knowledge acquisition, Conceptual understanding, Practice experience and, finally, 'Reflection on Performance – a process in which you reflect on past experience, recent performance and feedback, and apply this information to the process of integrating awareness and new understanding, leading to improved performance.'

When discussing their perception of the relationship within this programme between competence-based and reflective learning approaches to social work education, key informant 1 described Programme A as *"remarkable for its excellent liaision with the field"* and, further, made the point that *"For us, the practice placement experience far outweighs any other learning processes within the institution."* The practice learning documentation refers to the purpose of practice learning as 'to provide students with the opportunity to evidence' the six DipSW core competences as well as the DipSW values requirements. Additionally, CCETSW Requirement 5.2.1(v)[2] is cited within this document: 'to demonstrate student's ability and capacity to reflect on their practice;

[2] Taken from 'Assuring Quality in the Diploma in Social Work'

transfer knowledge and skills and values in practice; and understand their response to dealing with change including personal learning style.'

Key informant 1 also observed that Programme A's approach to and use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is: *"... not as separate entities, but as coming together in a kind of fusion."* And further that: *"To over emphasise one or the other would be unacceptable."* Key Informant 2 however commented that *"Inevitably you can't get away from the competences framework and we see this clearly in the DipSW modules. But throughout the contextual degree, we probably lean towards a more reflective approach."*

The first year and much of the second year of Programme A are integrated within a Joint Social Sciences Degree framework wherein students may transfer at the end of either years one or two to a three year programme leading to a Social Science degree with a specialism in either Sociology or Politics. From the outset of year two, students participate in Professional Development group tutorial meetings for the purpose of making explicit connections between agency-based practice learning and university-based teaching and learning. The following table demonstrates the detail of the composition and structure of Programme A:

Structure of Programme A

Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Year Four
Education Skills, Issues in Social Research and Computer Familiarisation	Research Methods: The Methodology of the Social Sciences	Reflexive Processes in Practice	Dissertation Preparation
Statistics for Social Scientists	Research Methods: Group Project	Dissertation Preparation	Social Work, Social Psychiatry and Mental Health
Development of Social Policy	Equality, Opportunity and Social policy	Social Work Theory and Concepts	Contemporary Social Issues
Contemporary Social Policy: British and European Perspectives	European Comparative Social Policy	Social Work Practice in Context	EITHER: Penal Policy and Social Welfare OR Children, Youth, Crime and Social Policy
European Social Structures	The Social Construction of Welfare	Law and Practice	EITHER: Social Work with Children and Families OR Social Work and Old Age OR Health, Disability and Social Work
Social Processes in Modern European Society	Social Work Practice and Skills	Social Work with Children and Families	
Britain: Institutions and Politics	General Law and Welfare Benefits	Welfare Organisations: The delivery of Welfare	
Contemporary Issues in Social Work	Professional Legislation for Social Workers		
Interpersonal Communication Skills	Communities and Agencies		
Introduction to Applied Psychology	Social Work Values		
30-day Introductory Social Work Learning Placement (Block)		50-day Social Work Placement (Block)	80-day Social Work Placement (Block)

Observation of student tutorial:

The tutorial did not have a pre-set agenda but, rather, was an open opportunity for students to raise issues in a self-directed manner. It therefore commenced with the tutor asking students '*What would you like to talk about today?*' Student responses and ensuing discussion addressed three main areas in the following order: **i)** student anxiety regarding and planning for the Social Work Theory and Concepts module assessment event, **ii)** student enquiry as to standards of practice teaching (and the Practice Teaching Award as part of this), and **iii)** a discussion between students and the tutor as to preparation for the final year 80-day period of practice learning.

i)

One student expressed anxiety about a forthcoming exam in relation to the Social Work Theory and Concepts module: *'It's a three hour exam and I feel like you need to know a lot to respond to that and that I just don't.'* (Student 3). This was quickly echoed by another student who commented *'I feel okay with the lecture stuff, you know the basics of the different theories and who said what about them. But I'm not comfortable about the stuff we did in seminars around putting it into practice.'* (Student 2). A further student offered reassurance with: *'It's not complicated stuff – you just need to know a little about a lot of different theories.'* (Student 1). The tutor asked whether students had approached the module lecturer for preparatory guidance and students 2 and 3 confirmed that they had and that the module lecturer had agreed to provide summaries of each area of teaching input – but these students continued to express that they felt unsure about how to relate these different theoretical/conceptual areas to practice. A general discussion among students followed regarding this module as a 'hard' element of the programme and to the effect that six students had failed this assessment the previous year. The tutor suggested that the module lecturer be asked to provide *'an example of an application to practice'*. Student 4 commented: *'I have been listening in lectures but they didn't sink in, I didn't retain anything.'* After briefly reassuring students that re-sit arrangements are available in the event of failed assessments, the tutor stated *'You're all really strong, all of you, in*

both the college and your placements – so what's this about? Is it general anxiety about being assessed?' No immediate response came from the students and the tutor moved on to ask: *'What would be helpful for you in looking at these topics?'* All students who replied said that they would find the previously mentioned summaries helpful and the tutor suggested that they access and read these in readiness for the next group tutorial meeting *'so you can all check out your understanding.'* Student 5 commented: *'I learn by talking things through so for me it would be brilliant to hear and share ideas.'* No response to this was made by either the tutor or other students.

ii)

Student 1 stated: *'In my 50-day placement I had a really good practice teacher but now I'm worried about my expectations and the standard* [of practice teaching] *I'm expecting for the 80 days.'* There was general agreement between the students that tales of poor practice teachers were in circulation between students and that this was *'anxiety-creating'*. The tutor highlighted that, on the basis of their experience from the 50-day period of practice learning, students will be *'equipped better'* but Student 1 replied: *'It's not just about familiarity with the packs, it's about the general standard of work that your practice teacher does with you.'* The tutor confirmed that the minimum standard for: *'practice teachers we use is that they must all already have the Practice Teaching Award or be working towards it.'* Student 2 said: *'Yes but, for example ADP* [anti discriminatory practice], *some do it with us because they have to or some do it as a way of life'*. Other students put forward a range of questions as to how long a social worker must be qualified before undertaking the Practice Teaching Award, how long the Award takes, and what stage in the Award must be reached before a candidate may take students. The tutor briefly explained the Practice Teaching Award process and concluded with *'Just about every practice teacher is different; some may be very experienced but set in their ways and/or some may be new and fresh.'* No student response was made to this and the tutor's comment appeared to signal the end of this discussion.

iii)

The tutor reminded students that, within the next three weeks, they should each complete 'Learning Needs' forms issued by this programme, as part of their preparation for their final year 80-day period of practice learning. Students pointed out that these forms had very little space and asked if they could attach appendices. The tutor advised that this is permissible and informed students that, within these forms, they should discuss not only what they have learned from their 50-day periods of practice learning but also what they have learned in the course of subsequent university-based teaching. The tutor prompted consideration of this by asking: *'So what have you learned?'* Those students who replied framed their responses in terms of the DipSW core competences or practice requirements. For example: *'I've learned more about working in organisations'* (Student 5) and *'I've learned stuff about the application of law and policy, particularly around mental health'* (Student 1).

The tutor moved the discussion on to a discussion of students' individual strengths (also apparently requiring discussion by students on their 'Learning Needs' forms) by stating: *'I find students often struggle in identifying strengths. Can you identify your strengths?'* Student responses were various but uniformly negative e.g. *'No'* (Student 1), *'Not at the moment'* (Student 5), *'None'* (Student 3) and *'I've forgotten any'* (Student 2). The tutor said: *'Oh, come on. I know you all have loads – especially inner strengths.'* This was followed by a silence which was eventually broken by the tutor observing: *'It's really hard to identify strengths isn't it?'*

Student 5 asked: *'Do practice teachers choose us – or not choose us – on the basis of the information we put on our forms?'* The tutor did not reply directly to this but instead explained that as much information from students about themselves is helpful so: *'the placement can prepare to receive you.'* And then added: *'But you need to protect yourselves in terms of self disclosure.'*

Returning to the theme of strengths, the tutor asked: *'Can you each say one strength and/or your learning style?'* And followed this quickly with: *'Not if you don't want to.'* Again, silence ensued and the tutor broke this by asking if students were familiar with the

Honey and Mumford learning styles questionnaire?[3] One student replied that she had no knowledge of this whilst the others said nothing. The tutor then asked: *Does it not feel safe enough* [to discuss this] *or too difficult?'* No response came from the students and the tutor suggested that they could administer the learning styles questionnaire to one another.

Student 5 agreed to this proposal and went on to say that she felt her *'time management is very poor'* and that she had experienced considerable stress during the 50-day practice learning opportunity because she'd felt that she was running out of time to assemble her overall 'pack' of evidence. Student 4 said she had not used the learning styles questionnaire and was advised by the tutor to seek the reference from another tutor. The tutor told the students: *'You need this information* [about yourselves] *as on the final placement you need to show how you've incorporated your learning style into the placement and accommodated your practice teacher's style.'* This comment appeared to prompt student responses; Student 1: *'I'm a reflector. I like to read a lot and I've got a good memory'* (this student had earlier replied 'no' when asked if she could identify any strengths and the tutor responded with *'that wasn't so hard to say was it?'*), Student 2: *'I need to feel prepared and be really well prepared. I work hard at this. I'm a reflector/activist.'*, Student 3: *'I'm a reflector/pragmatist. I realised when on my placement I had to reflect a lot and I did. I think a lot about essays, even though I always end up very last minute.'* The tutor probed Student 3, asking her to name a strength and the student responded with: *'Communication, I suppose.'*

The tutor summarised with: *'Good. You've all managed to say a strength and have some feedback. Have a go at the placement forms and think about an agenda for next time.'* General agreement came from the students as they prepared to leave and the tutor thanked them for: *'a really good session.'*

[3] Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1992), 2nd edition, *'The Manual of Learning Styles'*, Maidenhead: Peter Honey - this includes a questionnaire through which learners may identify their preferred learning style as that of a 'reflector', an 'activist', a 'pragmatist' or a 'theorist', or a combination of these. The questionnaire is commonly used by social work practice teachers in their work with students.

Interview Data:

Questions Cluster a. (Understandings and illustrations):

Imagery/understanding(s) of competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively, how/where each is to be found within this programme and whether either is thought to be predominantly in evidence on this programme?

■ The competence-based approach was seen, across student, practice teacher and programme personnel respondent groups, as predominantly recognizable in and illustrated by the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students as a DipSW requirement and thus as part of the programme. This was demonstrated in the following responses:

"I would assume that would be on practice [learning] *and you would have to hit certain competencies that were expected."* (Student respondent 1)

"I think it has been the foundation of how students have approached their practice learning." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"In the practice assessment pack which has grids which identify where the evidence is to show that students are able to meet that particular practice or value requirement." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Nonetheless, there was some indication that that a competence-based approach was also discerned within the context of university-based teaching and learning. For example the learning outcomes of modules were described as:

".... heavily influenced by the competency curriculum." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

And a student respondent commented:

"Within the social work modules and essays that we have had to write, there have been certain elements that we have had to hit." (Student respondent 1)

■ The competence-based approach was understood across all respondent groups in terms of a 'breakdown' and as to do with 'specific areas/elements' of social work. For example:

"It is about specific elements of more general tasks or areas of practice and it is about very clear criteria." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"It is about breaking it [social work] *down isn't it? That is how I would describe it."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

Or, as more pithily summarised by a student respondent:

"Those dreadful grids." (Student respondent 3)

■ The competence-based approach was seen by some as a reductionist and fragmented approach:

"There is a danger that it would be kind of a reduction." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"It is a kind of channelled practice, it is almost boxed practice. I think it has had quite a fragmenting impact in some ways on the way students see the business of social work, the process of social work." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

However, others argued against this as a mistaken understanding:

"It is not just about picking your way through, but it is actually the whole – so I don't see it as almost like a task tick box at all." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

And one student respondent proposed the focussed and demarcated nature of a competence-based framework for learning as positively beneficial:

"You can, you know, tune into the parts where you need to work on rather than having to look at the whole of the picture all of the time." (Student respondent 1)

■ The competence-based approach was seen across the three respondent groups as fairly centrally to do with assessment and with standards - more so than as an approach to teaching and learning. For instance:

"When I think about core competencies, I automatically think about assessment more than I do around teaching and reflection and things." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

And as a way of demonstrating 'fitness to practice' to employers:

"It is about putting a number of elements together to ensure fitness for practice." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ Flowing from this, the competence-based approach was very much seen as associated with and emphasising the notion of evidence and of evidence-based assessment. This was shown as follows:

"A list of competencies; looking for evidence that would support those competencies absolutely." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"It is about the sort of elements that are required in order to evidence a student's practice." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"They [the competences] *are about what is the evidence that this person has reached the required standard – or not? I think they are a way of identifying the range of evidence that somebody has learned or not."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Notwithstanding the objective assessment approach implied by these responses, no respondents articulated a perception of the competence-based approach as in any way empowering or enabling of students in terms of the power relations between learners and their teachers/assessors.

■ Furthermore, the suggestion was made that this emphasis upon the seeking, gathering and presentation of evidence may lead to learning opportunities being selected and engaged with primarily to demonstrate (evidence) specific areas of competence rather than in response to a student's particular interests or developmental needs, or indeed for their own sake. One student respondent observed:

"I feel it is a little bit like jumping through hoops; that you have to meet certain criteria and prove you can do certain things and I also think we possibly design our work, or arrange our work, around that sometimes .... Sometimes you have to sort of contrive to meet your competencies." (Student respondent 2)

■ Reflective learning was understood across the three respondent groups as an analytical and critical approach.

"To analyse, to be critical of your practice – to think about it." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"Rather than, sort of, meeting criteria, it is analyzing .... and identifying why we do that, what is the outcome of this etc." (Student respondent 2)

"It is encouraging students to develop skills in analyzing and evaluating their practice." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

■ Implicit in these findings is an association between reflective learning and the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students, particularly as both student and programme personnel respondents referred to the requirement that students produce

reflective written commentaries on directly observed – and other – practice learning episodes as illustrative of how and where the use of reflective learning can be seen within this programme. However, although many practice teacher respondents talked of their preference for and attempts to promote reflective learning in their work with students, neither students nor programme personnel cited supervisory and/or teaching and learning dialogue between student and practice teacher as a place where reflective learning takes place.

The most frequently expressed example (by both student and programme personnel respondents) of the use of reflective learning within the context of university-based teaching and learning was a communication skills module involving case studies and videoed practice simulation. One student and the agency-based member of programme personnel referred to a reflective practice module and, again, one student and one programme personnel (university-based) respondent referred to a module on working with children and families, also involving the use of case studies and of role play.

■ Reflective learning was understood as linked to – even synonymous with – reflective practice:

"The reflective learning approach would be more about assessing students' ability to reflect on their practice – to be reflective practitioners." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"It is drummed into us that reflection is a big part of social work practice .... Each time we have done a placement we have been asked to reflect." (Student respondent 1)

And, further, as indicative of an inductive approach to the use of knowledge:

"It is looking for insights, gaining insights through practice." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"It might be inductive; it might be something that is derived from the situation rather than received wisdom....." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ Reflective learning was seen as a more active and learner-centred approach to learning and development. One practice teacher respondent described her experience of the use of reflective learning in the following terms:

"I feel like I am just facilitating, just holding the learning rather than being directive and trying to pull things out of the student." And her view that reflective learning encouraged a student to be more *"self-directive"* in contrast with the competence-based approach which resulted in *"a more passive recipient"* of learning. (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

This was echoed by a programme personnel respondent who described reflective learning as *"self-motivated learning."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Reflective learning was understood as embodying the conscious management and use of personal feelings on the part of the learner and, flowing from this, as incorporating self awareness and explicit use of existing experience.
One practice teacher noted an aspect of reflective learning as being *"...to kind of access feelings around what they* [students] *are doing – their own feelings, to reflect on those."* (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ Some educator respondents (i.e. practice teachers and programme personnel) expressed the perception that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches are used throughout this programme in a balanced manner. For example:

"We are very well aware of both and try to keep them in balance." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I wouldn't see one being used more than the other." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

However, this view was not universally shared:

"If I think about the way we do the programme team meetings and the way we liaise with our agencies, we are quite outcome-focussed – I would say it [the emphasis within this programme] *is probably competence."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"I think the competence-based side is more evident." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

Amongst students, no sense of balance was recognised with the differing perceptions expressed by educators mirrored by student respondents, two of whom cited the competence-based approach as more clearly in evidence, whilst one asserted the existence of a reflective learning emphasis as characterising the programme overall.

■ The issue of time, and in particular the relative brevity of the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning, was seen by some respondents as resulting in a prioritization of the competence-based approach since this was seen to enable the production by students and practice teachers of requisite evidence.

■ Difficulty in managing the theory-practice relationship with regard social work was cited as a further explanation for the perceived prioritization of the competence-based approach. As one student respondent commented:

"The theory that they are teaching you; when you actually get out there [to agency-based practice learning], *you know, things are not quite how they said they would be .... Theory just seems so far away from what you are actually doing. It is quite hard to link the two.. It makes it easier; having these certain competencies that you have to reach ... it makes it more logical."* (Student respondent 1)

■ The suggestion was made that a competence-based framework for education, perhaps because of its apparent wealth of accompanying procedures, language and requirements will dominate upon its introduction but, over time, will come to be used more flexibly and creatively and in conjunction with the reflective learning approach:

"I think there has been an evolution over time. I think initially the competence-based approach was quite overwhelming for practice teachers when we first started working with it. And I think, certainly I can't speak for other people, but I certainly felt I had to work very hard to get my head around how that worked and what it did and it is almost as if, over time, we have been able to recover more the kind of reflective processes and make the process less, if you like, restrictive and become more able to open up the sort of reflective side of the process." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

Questions Cluster b. (Working together):

Can the two approaches work together, how/where in this programme can they be seen working/being used together, what might help them be used together (more) and is there a perception of conflict/contradiction between the two approaches?

■ All three respondent groups agreed that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches can be used alongside one another and work together within social work education. However, the two approaches were not seen as synonymous or interchangeable but, rather, as complementary and even interdependent:

"The paradox is that both actually achieve something which each by itself doesn't." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Both student and practice teacher respondents cited the need for the use of both approaches to be evident in the practice learning portfolio[4] as illustrative of their dual use. The only programme personnel respondent to refer to this was the tutor with specific responsibility for agency-based practice learning. A further programme personnel respondent (agency-based) mentioned the university-based student induction to/preparation for agency-based practice learning as an illustration of the two approaches being used and working together – but without specifying how this occurs.

[4] A cumulative set of student-produced material and practice teacher feedback and comment, presented in the form of an individual portfolio, that was used by this programme to demonstrate the process and outcomes of each of the periods of agency-based practice learning for each student.

One programme personnel respondent stated that this programme does not value in-depth appraisal of how practice learning outcomes are arrived at whilst another asserted that the modules which she delivers both promote and require 'critical thinking' on the part of students.

A practice teacher respondent suggested the timetabling of the reflective practice module to take place immediately prior to agency-based practice learning indicated dual use of the two approaches and one student respondent referred to the university-based communication skills module as simultaneously embodying both the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches.

Hence a range of perceptions as to where dual use of the two approaches could be exemplified within this programme were expressed.

■ In terms of what might be helpful in facilitating the two approaches to be used alongside one another (more), student respondents suggested:

- more explicit reference, in the course of university-based teaching, to the core competences used within the context of agency-based practice learning;
- more university-based essays, requiring analysis but focusing on these core competences, that could be undertaken during, and in tandem with, the periods of agency-based practice learning.

These student recommendations appeared to relate to enhanced integration between university and agency-based learning and were echoed by a practice teacher respondent whose suggestion was for improved communication between the university and practice learning agencies as to the content of university-based teaching.

Student and practice teacher respondents also proposed more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning, encompassing more and more frequent formal direct observations of student practice learning.

Practice teacher and programme personnel respondents agreed the need for *"a cultural shift"* (Practice Teacher respondent 1) within the programme whereby students would be encouraged to be less preoccupied with the competence-based framework and requirements and to be more reflective in their engagement with their social work education.

One programme personnel respondent advocated a more central emphasis within university-based teaching, upon formative assessment aimed at skills development and another proposed, perhaps similarly, increased use of classroom exercises aimed at stimulating thinking by students about their own identities.

■Whilst all programme personnel and most practice teacher respondents perceived contradiction – and even conflict – between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, no student respondents expressed this. Instead:

They do go hand in hand and you couldn't do one without the other." (Student respondent 1)

■For programme personnel and practice teacher respondents, there was a potential for tension between breaking social work practice down into distinct areas or elements of competence on the one hand and a holistic approach on the other:

"I think you can lose sight of the whole." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"One of the things I don't like about the competence-based [approach] *is about fitting practice into the core requirements whereas with reflection it is about looking at things as a whole rather than breaking them down."* (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

Again, this suggests a manipulation of the agency-based practice learning experience in order to provide evidence of required elements of competence.

■ Further possible conflict between the two approaches was illustrated by the concern that a student could potentially evidence all areas of competence and pass the period of agency-based practice learning, if not the whole programme, whilst having - or having shown - limited ability to reflect:

"The competence framework can be misused." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"My struggle sometimes is that ..... they [students] *have met the criteria for all the competences, but for me there is still that crucial element that is missing."* (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

■Programme personnel respondents emphasized the importance of balanced use of the two approaches and suggested conflict as likely to arise where imbalance occurs. For instance, the following story of an applicant's interview for a place on the programme was recounted. The applicant had:

".... A huge file of certificates from the NVQ module about how you should do this and you shouldn't do that .... she successfully kind of jumped through the hoops .... But she almost stereotyped, really, the kind of work expectancy of a competence-based approach .... What appears to emulate a reductionist approach in practice." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

The point being made here was that the applicant was not offered a place on the programme because, despite her apparent competence, she was seen as lacking in other areas e.g. interpersonal skills and self awareness. Thus purely competence-based evidence was not, in and of itself, seen as sufficient and an over-emphasis upon this viewed as possibly leading to mistaken judgments e.g. as to admissions.

Another respondent talked in terms of *"a continuum"* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2) with either extreme of this being characterized purely by either the competence-based or reflective learning approaches as problematic and indicative of imbalance.

■ A further concern – or source of potential contradiction between the two approaches – raised by a programme personnel respondent was in terms of time:

"When they [students] *are out in practice they are not given the time to reflect and the time to think clearly, you know. You need space to do so, so that is a kind of contradiction in this and where the two don't meet."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

The notion that reflective learning somehow needs and takes more time than the comparatively swift process of demonstrating and thereby evidencing competence appears then to be shared throughout all respondent groups in relation to this programme.

■ A tension for practice teachers between simultaneously enabling reflection and assessing competence was proposed because of student preoccupation with the competence framework. For example:

"I think some students come out thinking about this Portfolio – they have got to get this Portfolio [of evidence of required competences] *complete and that is the focus."* ." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

Once again then, the notion of prescribed competences driving the agency-based practice learning experience and opportunities is aired.

Questions Cluster c. (Practice Learning):
What elements of either/both approaches are needed to pass placements, emphasis within university-based placement preparation, preferences of practice teachers, emphasis within programme guidance re placements, perceptions of practice teachers as to student preferences, preferred term for practice learning, how role of practice teacher is seen, training of practice teachers?

■ All three respondent groups agreed that student evidence of agency-based practice learning linked to core competences only is insufficient for a student to achieve a pass mark in relation to periods of agency-based practice learning. Further, practice teacher and programme personnel respondents agreed that the practice learning portfolio that is produced by a student and practice teacher and in which the practice learning that has

been engaged with is outlined and illustrated, should demonstrate the student's reflective capacity as well as evidence of the required competences. For example:

"If I had a student that was really good, like at bringing me evidence, identifying the practice requirements and putting the Portfolio together, but wasn't very strong on reflective learning then I would be really, really concerned." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ This position was expanded upon through the perception (again, shared throughout the respondent groups) that a requirement for reflection is inherent in the way that competence is demonstrated and evidenced. This was expressed as follows:

"You have to show that you are competent and everything that you do has to be reflected upon so they are both there, you can't do one without the other." (Student respondent 1)

An example of a recent discussion of a final year student's progress was provided by a programme personnel respondent by way of illustration:

"The student is perfectly capable of following procedures; there were no contrary indicators about the practice being anything other than fine. But there is not evidence in that placement Portfolio to evidence or to suggest this student is able to reflect. So more work is being done." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

Whilst a clear perception of an inter-dependent relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is implied (i.e. in that competence is seen as only attainable through reflective development), these responses do not in fact distinguish between reflective practice and reflective learning.

■ A suggestion, by both a practice teacher and a student respondent, was put forward to the effect that evidence of competence only is enough in the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning, but that evidence of reflective learning also is required in the second (80-day) and final period.

■ In the same way that student respondents had differing perceptions as to which, if either, approach is primarily in evidence on this programme, student responses as to whether the preparation for agency-based practice learning emphasizes both approaches more or less equally, or one more than the other, were at variance. This can be seen by the following:

"There is an element of reflective [learning] *in there but I don't really feel that has sort of been pushed through. It is more about meeting the competences."* (Student respondent 2)

"Thinking about it, they probably encouraged our, you know, reflective work." (Student respondent 3)

Whilst programme personnel were of the view that, in this particular context, the need for reflection is emphasised alongside the need for the demonstration of competence by students, practice teacher respondents expressed uncertainty and an inability to comment deriving from lack of knowledge of this aspect of the programme:

"I am not sure ..." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"I am not aware of what it emphasises." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ In response to a question as to whether, in their view, this programme's written guidance regarding agency-based practice learning emphasises both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches more or less equally, or one more than the other, three practice teacher respondents said they felt both were emphasised. This was illustrated through reference to the guidance containing information both about the competence framework and about student-produced reflective commentaries. However, one practice teacher respondent felt that the reflective learning approach receives greater emphasis and gave examples of this in terms of the information provided regarding direct observations of student practice learning and, again, student-produced reflective

commentaries. One practice teacher respondent said that she felt neither approach was emphasised or made particularly clear.

■ Student respondent perceptions as to whether (in their experience) practice teachers appeared to prefer either approach more than the other were equally variable with two stating that their practice teachers had made balanced use of both the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches and one saying that her practice teachers had clearly favoured the competence-based approach and had provided little guidance as to reflective learning.
Again, the observation was made that the competence-based approach seemed to be more in evidence in the course of the 50-day period of agency-based practice learning.

■The observation was made by two practice teacher respondents that students tend to demonstrate a clear preference for either the competence-based or the reflective learning approaches. For example:

"Some students are very much in favour of the competence base because it is kind of clear and tight isn't it? And they find the reflective learning quite difficult and more challenging. Whereas other students have definitely found the competence side as almost like a weight to drag with you when they are inspired and flowing and want to be onwards and learning." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

Further, responses indicated that whilst all students are keen to address or 'fill in' the competence requirements, more able students manage these requirements more reflectively. Again it was suggested that the reflective learning approach is more suitable to, or likely to receive more emphasis during, the second 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. None of the five practice teacher respondents characterised the students from this programme with whom they have worked as demonstrating a preference for using the reflective learning approach in the course of their agency-based practice learning.

■ When asked what terminology they habitually use to describe the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students, all practice teacher respondents stated that they use the word 'placement' except one who said that, probably as a result of her involvement in discussion as to the forthcoming new social work degree, she has begun to use the term 'practice learning'.

One practice teacher respondent described them self as primarily assessing student practice (rather than student practice learning). All other practice teacher respondents described their role as assessing both a student's capacity to learn in a reflective manner and the evidence of competence gathered and presented by a student.

■ When asked what, if any, specific training they had undertaken in preparation for taking on the role of practice teacher, all practice teacher respondents stated that they had successfully completed the Practice Teaching Award. Two respondents had completed this 10 years previously, one 8 years previously, one 4 years previously and one 2.5 years previously.

When asked to consider whether the training for this award had prepared them primarily in terms of either the competence-based or the reflective learning approaches, all respondents stated either that reflective learning had been emphasised or had featured alongside the competence-based approach in a balanced manner.

Questions Cluster d. (University-based teaching and assessment):

Modules in which either/both approaches particularly evident, forms taken by university-based assessment, marking schedules, programme guidance re assignments, perceptions of students as to own preferences?

■ Both student and programme personnel respondents said that the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches have been used jointly throughout the university-based taught modules. A module on Social Work Skills and another focussing on Social Work with Children and Families were cited as embodying a more clear emphasis upon reflective learning (though a programme personnel respondent also commented that the Social Work with Children and Families module also makes explicit links with specific

areas of competence). The agency-based programme personnel respondent said that they do not know about university-based teaching and so could not comment.

■ Student respondents said that university-based assessment tasks are mainly in the form of essays but that Law and Social Policy are assessed through examinations. One student respondent referred to a small-scale piece of research involving questionnaire design and another expressed the perception that, in her experience, essays relating primarily to social science issues are more 'fact-based' whilst those relating primarily to social work practice are more 'interpretive'. As well as referring to the essays and exams mentioned by student respondents, university-based programme personnel respondents said that assessment of university-based learning also takes place through group-based student presentations and analysis of videoed role play exercises undertaken by students. The agency-based programme personnel respondent said that they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment.

■Two out of the three student respondents and two out of the four programme personnel respondents said that the marking schedules for university-based assessment tasks indicate that demonstration of both knowledge and reflective understanding is required. However, one student and one programme personnel respondent described the marking schedules as predominantly competence-based and said that whilst critical analysis of issues is required, no personal opinion as to these may be expressed and all writing must be in the third person. Once again, the agency-based programme personnel respondent said that they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment.

■ With regard the general guidance for the completion of assignments issued by this programme, the overall view from both student and programme personnel respondents was that this appears to adopt the competence-based approach in that assignments are broken down into a series of different elements or criteria, similar language to that of the practice learning core competences is used and knowledge rather than reflection is emphasised. Only one student and one programme personnel respondent felt that this general guidance embodies a combination of the competence-based and reflective

learning approaches. The agency-based programme personnel respondent said that they do not know.

■ Student respondents were asked about their own individual preferred approach to learning; one said they prefer the competence-based approach, one said that they prefer the reflective learning approach and one said that they feel both are important and prefer combined use of the two approaches.

Questions Cluster e. (Overall programme emphasis):
Emphasis within programme conscious and how this has come about, emphasis made explicit and, if so, how/where?

■ Although programme personnel respondent perceptions differed regarding which, if either, of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches is emphasised by this programme, all said that they saw the emphasis as a conscious feature of this programme's design. In response to a question as to how such conscious emphasis (whatever this is seen as being) has come about, only the agency-based programme personnel respondent contextualized this programme's evolution within the context of developments in pre and post qualifying social work education more widely. However, some programme personnel respondents saw the university-agency partnership as significant to this aspect of the development of this programme:

"It comes from the realisation through the programme team meetings, through feedback from agencies, that there were gaps in the programme." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Alternatively, one programme personnel respondent saw this programme as having developed in tandem with its university-based leadership:

"I think that any course shows the kind of people that are involved in it and I think the people that are involved in the leadership of the course – not just one person, there are a few of them, are more competence-based really. Or certainly more managerial, more

kind of procedural and less into the kind of processes of human interaction and that kind of thing." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ In line with these varying perceptions, programme personnel respondents differed in whether they felt that the emphasis (upon use of either or both of the competence-based or reflective learning approaches) within this programme is made explicit. Similarly, responses to a question as to where, within programme documentation, explicit mention is made of this programme's chosen emphasis indicated no common agreement. Responses ranged from guidance on agency-based practice learning to information on admission processes and criteria.

Questions Cluster f. (Relationship between approaches and professional identities):
Approaches seen as promoting different types of practitioners, which do employers prefer, does this influence style of practice teaching, where/who decides the programme outcome in terms of type of practitioner promoted?

■ Responses from each of the respondent groups indicated the perception of very different professional identity characteristics arising from the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches respectively:

"Exclusively competence framework trained social workers will offer a very efficient administrative service for service users. They are very good on their procedures, applying care knowledge and various other bureaucratic processes but will have very little sense of the holistic professional art, if you like, of social work." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"A task focus goes with competence-based and the reflective learner is more creative usually." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"My concern would be for a competence-based approach that the worst case scenario could result in a practitioner who is very methodical in their approach but their

approach to assessment, for example, could become very tick boxy as opposed to holistic assessment." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

■ Again, responses from across the respondent groups suggested that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work education and practice is seen as inadequate and even dangerous for service users. This is demonstrated as follows:

"We are talking about someone's life here. You don't put it in a tick box, you know. And to me if you go down just the competence-based route you are in danger of doing that. The process becomes the means to the end, not the need of the client, the service user or whatever you want to call them." (Student respondent 3)

"The best example is someone who follows the care management guidance to the letter; is highly efficient and conscientious in forming an assessment of an old person whose wife has died and provides all the skills necessary to enable that person to retain independence. They might give out counseling for bereavement but generally their work is based on the kind of procedures and policies that the government and the department provides them with, but they fail to notice that the person is acutely depressed and then that man commits suicide. That is the difference I think about." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■From a practice teacher respondent came the view that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work education and practice is also potentially dangerous for the worker them self:

"They may be making the same mistakes every time. They won't be learning from what they are doing, they won't be developing and, ultimately, they will burn out very quickly and probably very soon." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ One university-based programme personnel respondent questioned whether a wholly or predominantly competence-based educated practitioner can be considered a professional:

"Exclusively competence framework trained social workers ..... will have very little sense of the holistic professional art, if you like, of social work. So I wouldn't consider them to be professionals." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Practice teacher and programme personnel respondents suggested that a predominantly competence-based social work education may give rise to social work practitioners who are more compliant/less challenging whilst more emphasis upon reflective learning could result in a more critical and assertive practitioner. A competence-based educated practitioner was described as:

".... making sure that the team they are in like them, that the team managers are pleased that they are taking on the work .... and they are not challenging – you know, compliance." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

Whereas a more reflective learning educated practitioner was described alternatively as:

".... somebody who doesn't just take things at face value all the time, you know. Probably the one in the meeting who is the pain in the backside to the rest of the team." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ Practice teacher and programme personnel respondents also suggested that reflective learning gives rise to social work practitioners who are more aware of and questioning of ethics and their own value bases:

"I think they [students] *do need reflective practice, if nothing else by virtue of their values. It enables them to question or feel uneasy about these."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

"The overlaps between your personal and professional values or the agency's, or where they don't overlap and all those dilemmas and conflicts. A reflective practitioner

understands that and it may be difficult and uncomfortable but you have to understand that and work within that." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

Whereas the competence-based approach was characterized more in terms of 'defensive practice':

"A defensive practitioner is one that doesn't reflect those conflicts, those dilemmas .... so they may come in and they are doing the job because this is how the agency wants this and this done – and they are doing it." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ One student respondent expressed the perception that the reflective learning approach could promote a more independent thinking practitioner – and considered her own experience of this programme as follows:

"I suppose the competence-based practitioner would be the sort of person that goes by the book and does things in a sort of logical, proceduralist, imposed order whereas perhaps a reflective learner would be somebody that is a bit more independent perhaps. And I suppose that is the person I always wanted to be but I think perhaps that I have been pushed into that sort of logical proceduralism because that is what I have learned, you know." (Student respondent 2)

■ However, reservations about social work education and practice based wholly or predominantly upon the reflective learning approach were also expressed:

"Somebody who is deeply into reflective learning – as a student or as a practitioner – would probably not get very much work done." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"Someone who trains entirely within a reflective learning ethos is likely to find themselves only comfortable within a kind of therapeutic environment where they are working at a relatively un-pressured pace with time for reflection and large amounts of professional discretion." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Balanced use of the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches, leading to a practitioner embodying professional identity traits characteristic of both approaches was expressed as an ideal by programme personnel respondents as follows:

"That would be best – if you could dovetail the reflection and the competence." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"What I wouldn't want is just, kind of, administrators being produced. Nor would I want the therapist being produced. People need our social workers to be able to effectively work in both realms." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Programme personnel respondents were asked where or by whom the outcome of this programme is decided upon in terms of the type of practitioner it educates for/prepares. All university-based respondents described the university and partner agencies as working closely together to ensure consensus on this question. The agency-based programme personnel respondent said that this programme acts on feedback from, and seeks to meet the needs of, local employers.

■ Practice teacher respondents were asked what kind of practitioner they think local employers prefer. Three said that they think this is a more competence-based educated practitioner. One said that in their view local employers prefer a more reflective learning educated practitioner. One said that neither type of practitioner is necessarily preferred but, rather, that the culture and needs of the setting offering a vacancy would determine this question.

■Further, practice teacher respondents were asked if their perception of local employer preferences influences their approach to practice teaching approach. Responses were varied in that one practice teacher respondent said that students need time to engage with reflective thinking - and that a practice teacher can ensure this is available, whilst another said that students need to understand the limited time available within the workplace for

reflective thinking – and that a practice teacher can ensure this by limiting the availability of such time. All respondents asserted their belief that the reflective learning approach is important, though one qualified this by stating that, whilst important, reflective learning is not essential.

Questions Cluster g. (New social work qualification):

Involvement with preparation for new qualification and the emphasis within this, and respondents' preferred approach within new qualification?

■ All programme personnel and four out of five practice teacher respondents said that they have been involved with and had an opportunity to contribute to the planning by this programme for the introduction of the new social work degree.

Of the four practice teacher respondents who had had involvement, three perceived the planning for the new programme as emphasising the competence-based approach, though one qualified this by noting the view that there is perhaps potential, within the planning process, for strengthening the use and place of the reflective learning approach within the new programme. One practice teacher respondent felt unsure as to a discernible emphasis in terms of either the competence-based or reflective learning approaches.

Three out of the four programme personnel respondents asserted that the reflective learning approach is central to the preparatory thinking and planning for the new programme. One felt that it is not and said:

"I think there is still the emphasis upon producing a programme that has the practitioner running ready for practice in the real world so that will mean, you know, we have to underplay some of the reflective stuff because that isn't the language that the directors sitting at those meetings want to hear." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ Each group of respondents were asked what, in their view, the new social work degree programme should look like in terms of its use of the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches. The need for a combination of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, but with more emphasis than currently upon reflective learning was expressed across the three respondent groups. For instance:

"I think they are definitely both important for their different reasons and that there should be more of a mixture – but perhaps there should be more emphasis on reflective learning than there has been." (Student respondent 2)

"I think when students are thinking about their practice to have that competence framework to look at what they are actually doing and how they are working is really useful, it kind of spells social work out in a way. But I would like to see stress on the reflective learner and the responsibility for an individual social worker to be developing their own learning through that reflective process." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

Evidently then, the maintenance of the competence-based approach was viewed as important alongside the perceived need for more emphasis upon the reflective learning approach within the new programme.

Practice teacher respondents stated the need for a clearer framework for understanding and assessing reflective learning but for a less mechanistic framework for addressing competence-based learning and suggested that such developments could enable enhanced integration of the two approaches.
Both practice teacher and student respondents proposed that there should be more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning as in their view this is an effective vehicle for integrated use of the two approaches.

Finally, frustration was expressed by a university-based programme personnel respondent that the requirements of the new social work degree may impose – upon this programme and others – the introduction of new and more complex competence-based framework:

"I am also frustrated because the government has changed the rules again and introduced yet more complex kinds of competence frameworks because the way I see a competence framework is rather like a fence around a child's playground. What that does is to provide a protective framework that says: this is where the boundary is, these are

the staging posts – the anchors if you like which define social work professional activity. Within that you have to make it up through reflective learning processes – processes that are more imaginative, more creative and that is the heart of what we need to be allowed to teach and students need to learn." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Summary:

In summary, this case study has explored the perceived relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches to social work education with reference to a 4-year full time BSc (Hons) Social Policy and Social work/DipSW programme. Data has been drawn from a total of 14 individual interviews involving a range of final year student, practice teacher, programme personnel and key informant respondents.

The findings from the interviews indicate that a competence-based approach was understood as immediately concerned with evidence-based assessment through a process of breaking down the role and tasks of social work into a series of specific elements. Whilst there was some slight indication of this approach featuring within university-based teaching and learning, the majority of responses associated a competence-based approach with agency-based practice learning. A reflective learning approach was commonly understood as very much linked to reflective practice and as embodying personal self awareness and inductive use of knowledge. This approach was more explicitly - though not exclusively - associated with university-based teaching and learning. Some respondents perceived balanced use of the two approaches within this programme whilst others saw one or other (but particularly a competence-based approach) as more clearly in evidence.

Whilst acknowledging key differences between the two approaches, all respondents discussed them as complementary. The examples offered as to where, specifically, combined use of both approaches can be seen within this programme were: the practice learning portfolios completed by students and practice teachers and the preparation for agency-based practice learning undertaken with students. Although no student

respondents saw contradiction or conflict between the two approaches, educator respondents did express this view and illustrated it with specific concerns. Proposed strategies for facilitating the enhanced use of the two approaches alongside one another included greater integration between university and agency-based learning, more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning, increased emphasis upon formative assessment and decreased preoccupation with prescribed competences.

A view commonly shared by respondent groups was that, in order to pass the second and final assessed practice learning opportunity, students would need to demonstrate evidence of both their competence and their reflective capacity (evidence of competence only was suggested as perhaps sufficient for the first of the two practice learning opportunities). Whilst programme personnel saw the university-based preparation for practice learning as drawing equally on the two approaches, students had different perceptions as to which of the two approaches this preparation emphasises and practice teachers felt they did not know. However, the majority of practice teachers viewed the programme written guidance for agency-based practice learning as featuring both approaches. In terms of the preferences of students and practice teachers for either approach, responses from both groups were variable. A shared perception, however, was that reflective learning was associated with a more advanced approach to practice learning; either in terms of student ability or of the second and final period of practice learning. All practice teacher respondents felt that their practice teacher training had emphasised the use of both approaches.

University-based taught modules were seen by students and programme personnel as being informed by each of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Whilst little specific illustration was offered in support of this perception, certain modules were highlighted by respondents as more clearly embodying a reflective learning approach. The university-based use of a range and variety of approaches to summative assessment was reported. General programme guidance regarding assignments was seen as predominantly competence-based yet the more detailed marking schedules for different assignments were seen, by some respondents, as requiring the

demonstration by students of both competence-based use of knowledge and of reflective learning. The agency-based programme personnel respondent stated no knowledge of university-based teaching or assessment processes.

Programme personnel respondents were unanimous in asserting that the programme emphasis (upon either or both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches) was conscious and had developed over time through consultation between the university and local social work employers. Where these respondents differed was in their views as to which approach (if either) was in fact emphasised, whether this was made explicit by the programme or indeed where, within the programme documentation, any explicit reference to the programme's use of either or both approaches was made.

Fundamentally differing professional identities in emerging newly qualified social work practitioners were seen by all respondent groups as arising from sole or predominant use of either a competence-based or a reflective learning approach within pre-qualifying education and training. Whilst a competence-based approach was associated with administratively and procedurally-focussed practitioners whose emphasis would be upon the deductive application of knowledge and of bureaucratic processes within their work, the reflective learning approach was perceived as affiliated to a more enquiring and creative practice approach whereby practitioners think more autonomously and are ready to question their value bases in relation to their work. Neither type of professional identity in a pure form was viewed positively by respondents: a heavily proceduralist approach was seen as at risk of losing sight of service users as individuals and as inadequate both in terms of practice and of practitioner development. An overly questioning and reflective approach, however, was seen as potentially leading to inaction. Equal use of both competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches was viewed as more likely to lead to a more balanced professional identity in practitioners and this was a preferred outcome. Moreover, programme personnel respondents reported close consultation between university and agency bases with the aim of ensuring agreement as to the programme outcome. However, whilst all practice teacher respondents expressed a belief in the importance of reflective learning during pre-

qualifying education and training, the majority felt that employer preferences are for more competence-based educated practitioners.

The group tutorial meeting that was observed appeared to show students demonstrating a mixture of the indicators associated with the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches. On the one hand, students articulated concern with their performance in relation to discrete elements of the programme such as a forthcoming module assessment event. In discussion of this, both the tutor and students talked in terms of the application of knowledge *to* practice situations. Hence a more competence-based approach to learning appeared to be informing their thinking. On the other hand however, in discussion of the impending assessment, students spoke of their individual preferences and approaches to learning. They were also prompted by the tutor to each think about their use of self and of experience in preparing for the 80-day period of agency-based learning thereby demonstrating the use of a more reflective learning orientation.

To conclude, in looking towards the advent of the new social work degree, all the respondent groups that were interviewed expressed the view that both competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches need to feature within this – but with strengthened use of reflective learning than is currently the case.

APPENDIX VI

CASE STUDY B REPORT

Introduction:

Programme B is a 2-year full time DipSW/MA course. On completion of two years of study, students may exit with the DipSW qualification (and a Diploma in Higher Education (Social Work)). However, students who successfully complete both all elements of the DipSW course and an optional additional second year module in social science research design and methodology may also engage with year two seminars providing dissertation support and guidance and may submit a dissertation by the December following their completion of the DipSW for the award of MA in Social Work.

In compiling this case study, three key informant interviews were conducted to provide background information about Programme B. All had been involved with this programme for more than eight years. Individual interviews were undertaken with: four programme personnel (two agency-based/two university-based), all of whom had been involved with this programme for more than seven years; five practice teachers, who had worked with this programme for between three and nine years and of whom three had successfully undertaken the Practice Teaching Award (the other two had completed a more basic introductory training course) ; and four students, each of whom were in the final year of this programme and presently mid-way through their 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. One observation was undertaken involving a university-based tutor (not also interviewed) and seven final year students (none of whom were also interviewed). All participants volunteered to be involved in the research exercise following contact with and invitations from the researcher.

Programme B is one of two social work qualifying programmes offered within this region of the UK, the other being a 2-year DipSW programme with an optional third year leading to a degree in Social Science. Thus Programme B is the sole regional opportunity

for Masters level study encompassing the DipSW award. It is offered on the basis of an arrangement between this university and several different neighbouring Local Authorities that have agreed to provide agency-based practice learning opportunities to programme students.

This university has provided qualifying social work programmes for more than thirty years. The current DipSW/MA programme was validated and introduced in 1995 for an annual intake of 50 students. Entrants are usually graduates but non-graduates may also be accepted. The programme is situated within a School of Social Sciences and Education and is one of a suite of social work qualifying and post-qualifying (PQ) programmes offered by the School. An MSc/Advanced Award in Social Work is available for social work practitioners with a minimum of two years' post-qualifying experience as are PQ Child Care and Community Care programmes. A Professional Doctorate (Social Work) course of study is also offered. Social work education and training is the only vocational social science study offered within the School though a programme leading to a professional teaching qualification is also available.

No explicit programme aim, beyond the attainment by students of the DipSW qualification, and no specific references to teaching and learning processes are mentioned in the Programme B programme handbook or practice learning documentation. However, within the context of assessment requirements, Programme B's handbook cites CCETSW Regulation 3.5.1 [5]: 'Evidence of conceptualisation, critical analysis, reflection and transfer of knowledge, skills and values is essential for the award of the DipSW, and students must be required to provide this evidence in written work and in practice.'

Key informant 1 described Programme B's approach to teaching and learning as follows: *"Different modules have different emphases. We don't have in any sense a uniform or universal theme running through our approach to learning. It's not something we consciously try and construct."* Also, however, Key informant 1 noted: *"We tend to err slightly on the side of reflective learning in that we see this as equally demonstrated in*

[5] Taken from 'Rules and Requirements for the DipSW'

relation to placements and through what goes on in the small group, seminar-based teaching that is a feature of this course." Key informant 2 expressed a different perception, however, when discussing practice learning: *"It feels as if the fact that there are practice requirements to be demonstrated and evidenced, drives a very competence-based process – and this doesn't seem to get mitigated by this programme."* Key informant 2 described the approach to practice learning of Programme B students as: *"a very linear, checklist approach wherein there's a real 'done that, evidenced it, let's move on' feel from the students and they just don't seem to see things more holistically."* This perception was endorsed by key informant 3 who outlined the approach to teaching and learning of Programme B in the following terms: *"The emphasis in college teaching is certainly more about the reflective stuff but placements seem to have been driven down the competence-based road."*

The following table shows the composition and structure of Programme B:

Structure of Programme B

Year One	Year Two	MA Dissertation
Anti-Discriminatory Practice	Social Work Core Competences II	Students pursuing the MA award are awarded the DipSW at the end of Year Two (July) but may submit the MA dissertation at any point up until the following December.
Social Work Core Competences I	EITHER: Social Work with Children and Families OR Social Work and Physical Illness, disability and Older People OR Social work and Mental Health OR Youth Social Work	
Social Work with Children and Families	Organisational Contexts: Preparing for Practice	
Youth Social Work	Social Work Evaluation	
Social Work and Community Care	Principles and Practice of Research Design (optional – only for students pursuing MA award)	
Social Work and the Law	Dissertation Seminars (optional – only for students pursuing MA award)	
Anti-Poverty Strategies for Social Workers	Special Interest Workshops	
Applied Social Science (Sociology and Social Policy)		
Crime and Deviance		
Life Transitions and Psychology		
Social Work Skills		
Information Technology and Social Work		
50-day Social Work Placement (Block)	80-day Social Work Placement (Integrated: 3 days in agency/2 days in university)	

Observation of student tutorial:

The Tutor set the agenda for the meeting by proposing: *'I think we should go round and share what's happening on your placements.'* He then clarified that opportunities for students to meet with him individually would be available after the group meeting. What followed within the tutorial was discussion by each of the students in turn of their experiences within their current practice learning opportunities. Whilst there were sometimes brief interjections from other students within the group (e.g. *'I've visited that place too.'*) and occasional shared humour, the format of the meeting was that one student at a time presented their experiences and responded to questions or observations from the tutor.

Student 7 stated: *'I'm doing fine'* and proceeded to give a fairly detailed description of her agency setting (a community mental health team) in terms of its brief and the staff within it. Student 7 said *'I've had my fingers dipped in so many aspects of mental health'* and then, as an illustration of this, talked about a visit to a specific forensic service. The tutor asked: *'What kinds of work are you undertaking?'* and Student 7 replied: *'I've done an assessment and various one to one bits of work – I don't know if you'd call it counseling, that type of thing'* adding that she'd wanted to become involved with some group work within the practice learning agency but the time limited nature of her period of practice learning had precluded this. She then stated that she was working with: *'one woman I've got very, very close to.'* Student 7 was not asked to expand on this statement; instead Student 6 was turned to by the tutor to provide the next contribution.

Student 6 reported: *'I'm at a residential rehabilitation centre for mothers and their children. The approach* [used by the agency] *is cognitive therapy. I didn't really like that – it's brought up a lot of values things for me.'* Student 6 explained further that, in the course of the practice learning opportunity, she has visited other similar resources and discovered that a range of theoretically informed approaches are used in their work. She said: *'It's been good* [to make these visits] *otherwise I would have left the placement thinking cognitive therapy was the only approach.'* In response to a question from the tutor, Student 6 briefly outlined some of the specific learning opportunities she has

engaged with. These included being a key worker for a small number of residents and liaising with other agencies on their behalf. Student 6 also noted that some of the service users she'd encountered had been *'anti social workers and social services'* and observed: *'That was a bit strange at first and I didn't want to say about training to become a social worker. But my confidence has grown.'* The tutor response to this was to nod and to indicate to the next student that it was now their turn to speak.

Student 5 briefly described her practice learning opportunity setting – a residential school for children and young people aged 10-16 years before commenting: *'I'm a little too well accepted as I've become a punch bag.'* She then revealed a substantial number of large bruises on each of her arms to the group. She was encouraged by other students to roll up her sleeves to demonstrate the full extent of this bruising. The tutor asked: *'How are you feeling about that?'* and Student 5 replied with a discussion of *'the volatile behaviour of the kids'*, citing examples of this and recounting episodes she had observed or been involved with. She concluded: *'You've got to remember it's not personal – it's not directed at you'*. Another student asked *'Does that help?'* and Student 5 responded: *'Well, the first thing you want to do is whack them back.'* This was greeted with laughter or smiles from the rest of the students. The tutor asked a number of questions about health and safety procedures within the setting and the physical restraint training that Student 5 had accessed. Student 5 confirmed her knowledge – and apparent confidence – in both these areas before going on to refer to her involvement with one particular case and to note: *'I've met all the core competences and the values and things so they'll* [agency staff] *let me go anywhere and do anything now.'* The tutor did not respond directly to this statement other than to nod and to make a general observation to the group at large as to the importance of consistency of staff approach in residential settings. He then asked the next student to talk.

Student 4 provided a descriptive outline of her practice learning setting within a hostel for people with alcohol problems. She repeatedly used 'we' to describe the work of the agency and added: *'I'm not scared of them* [service users] *anymore. I think my confidence has grown; I'm not inhibited by them. I've found out that we've got paedophiles and sex*

offenders [within the hostel] *but it's good to have situations like that to test your value system.'* The tutor made no direct comment regarding these observations but instead asked about safety issues in relation to the student who replied: *'I'm never on my own. But at night sometimes it's just two females* [staff members] *on and I think that's wrong.'* Again, the tutor did not respond directly to this but, to the group as a whole, commented that: *'a lot of service users are 'graduates' of the public care system.'* Student 4 responded, with reference to a particular service user with whom she had been working: *'I didn't like him at all but then, talking to him about his history, it does change your opinion.'* Student 3 was then asked by the tutor to update the group on their practice learning experiences.

Student 3 introduced her practice learning setting as a supported housing project for people with mental health problems and talked about her key working role with a recently admitted resident. The tutor asked a question about the theoretical orientation of the work and the student replied: *'carrot and stick, it seems like.'* The tutor said: *'You're applying a cognitive-behavioural approach then, aren't you?'* There was then general laughter from the students. At this point the tutor received a mobile telephone call and left the room. Student 3 then began referring to other students' practice learning opportunities in terms of links between these and her own setting and experiences. For instance, Students 3 and 5 discussed the use of physical restraint within their respective settings and Student 3 reiterated Student 5's earlier point that: *'their* [service users'] *behaviour should not be personalised.'*

The tutor returned to the room and immediately asked Student 2: *'Tell us how you're doing.'* Student 2 described his practice learning in a youth justice setting and the social work role and tasks associated with this e.g. accompanying a young person to a police interview in the role of 'appropriate adult'. Student 2 said: *'I went to Court on Monday and I ended up phoning the manager about a procedure that had never happened before. It was sad because I felt that if I knew the procedures I wouldn't have had to.'* No comment on this was made by the tutor who simply nodded before looking at Student 1.

Student 1 spent some time explaining his practice learning arrangements which were taking place under the general auspices of a national mental health charitable organisation but specifically within two separate drop-in centres and an employment project. Student 1 directly addressed Student 7 as he spoke and the two students discussed their shared knowledge of the recent closure of a local small psychiatric hospital. Student 1 said: *'In my past I'd worked in a drop-in centre for young people. Plus, I already knew about people coming out of W* [a local large psychiatric hospital which remains open] *with terrible stories. The trauma of hospital will stick in my mind.'* Student 1 also commented: *'I'm already a visitor to W – I was a buddy for 13 years to a young self harmer. Now I can see things that I'd learned with him happening down in the drop in centres.'* Student 1 was not asked to expand on or explain these observations.

By now the tutorial period was almost over and this was confirmed by the tutor glancing at his watch. He said: '*Briefly, then, there are some interesting links between your placements – and it's good if you can share your experiences.*' The tutor then concluded the tutorial meeting by reminding students that he was available to meet with them individually that day *'on request'* and leaving the room.

Interview Data:

Questions Cluster a. (Understandings and illustrations):

Imagery/understanding(s) of competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively, how/where each is to be found within this programme and whether either is thought to be predominantly in evidence on this programme?

- Practice teacher respondents perceived the competence-based approach as predominantly associated with the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students as part of the DipSW qualification and thus as a programme requirement. This was the example of where and how the competence-based approach is to be found within this programme that was proposed by all practice teacher respondents.

■ For student and programme personnel respondents, however, the competence-based approach was also discerned within university-based teaching and learning:

"We had core competences teaching in seminars every week." (Student respondent 1)

"We are quite clear, I think, that whilst students go out into practice to provide positive evidence of their competence base, it is also demonstrable while they are engaged in college." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Practice teacher and programme personnel respondents discussed their understanding of the competence-based approach in terms of a break down of the role and tasks of social work. For instance:

"Almost like an MOT, sort of like tick box." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"It's the matrix or grid thing isn't it? Where social work gets broken down into the basics of the job so students can see exactly what they've got to show on placement." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

■ However, only one out of the four student respondents shared this view whilst others, and programme personnel respondents, expressed the perception that the competence-based approach involves more than practical demonstration in response to specified areas of social work practice For example, one student respondent discussed their understanding as follows:

Also including the values and ethics, the social justice and social welfare, and incorporating all of that as a whole – so that is my understanding of the competency base." (Student respondent 3)

A programme personnel respondent contrasted their perception of the use of the competence-based approach within social work education with its place within National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) awards by stating:

"The reflective part [of the competence-based approach], *it seems to be much more important than what you do and how you do it."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

And for another programme personnel respondent, the competence-based approach explicitly embodied a relevant knowledge base as follows:

"To carry out any aspect of social work competently, that is in a way that is good enough to pass their placements; students need to show how theory and research have informed their work." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ The competence-based approach was seen as a reductionist and fragmented approach by only one out of the five practice teacher respondents who commented:

"It breaks things down and breaks them up at the same time! You've got the basics, but in a quite unconnected way." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ Practice teacher respondents – but not those within the programme personnel or student respondent groups – described the competence-based approach as centrally important in relation to assessment and to standards. For example:

"The practice requirements are the only thing we've got to assess them [students] *with. If we didn't have them the only way we could say if a student was ready to pass or not would be if they'd really fouled up somewhere or if we could imagine working with them in the same team."* (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

■ However, both practice teacher and programme personnel respondents saw the competence-based approach as associated with and emphasising the notion of evidence and of evidence-based assessment of student performance:

"It means to me that students are able to provide information, to provide a selection of accounts of their practice – set against a set of clearly specified criteria." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"They [students] *are covering the essential areas of the work and evidencing that."* (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

Notwithstanding the objective assessment approach implied by these responses, no respondents articulated a perception of the competence-based approach as in any way empowering or enabling of students in terms of the power relations between learners and their teachers/assessors.

■ Moreover, for practice teacher respondents, this emphasis upon the provision of evidence raised the possibility of certain learning opportunities being proposed and undertaken simply in order to demonstrate – and thus to evidence – particular areas of competence, rather than to respond to student interests or learning needs. For example:

"Not so much at the beginning probably but as you go on you end up having to fit what you think of for them [students] *to do, with the practice requirements they've got left to cover."* (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

■ Each of the three respondent groups expressed an understanding of reflective learning in terms of an analytical and critical approach. These responses demonstrate the perspectives of the different respondent groups:

"It is not enough to say you can communicate well because a service user opened up and talked to you about, maybe, painful things. I want students to be able to know – and tell me – <u>why</u> they worked in the way they did, how they can improve, the consequences of not having chosen to work in a particular way – all that sort of thing." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"Stopping and thinking about what you are doing and your effect on the service user and their effect on you." (Student respondent 1)

"Constant questioning by students about the how and why of their practice. Being prepared to really take apart their practice – not just in terms of the practice requirements – but in a much more critical way so that they can see the implications of what they are doing or saying. And how they can improve." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ These responses suggest an association by student, programme personnel and practice teacher respondents, between reflective learning and the periods of agency-based practice learning that form part of this programme. Furthermore, all respondent groups referred to the reflective written commentaries that are produced by students in the course of their agency-based practice learning and that form part of their practice learning portfolios, as a key illustrative example of the use of the reflective learning approach within this programme.

Practice teacher respondents also referred to a specific practice learning-based based (and joint marked) essay that students complete as they near the end of the 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. Supervision and/or teaching and learning dialogue was not cited by any respondent as an example of where and how the reflective learning approach is used.

However, two out of the four student respondents discussed reflective learning as a theme running throughout university-based teaching and learning and one programme personnel respondent referred to classroom discussion as encouraging reflective learning. Student respondents and one programme personnel respondents mentioned a university-based module, which takes place before any agency-based practice learning, on 'preparing for practice learning'.

All student and one out of the four programme personnel respondents said that all essays explicitly require the demonstration of the reflective learning approach.

■ By practice teacher and student respondents, reflective learning was seen as linked to – even synonymous with - reflective practice:

"I would think very much about reflective practice." (Student respondent 2)

"I think it means being a reflective practitioner." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

And student and programme personnel respondents articulated an understanding of reflective learning terms of a cyclical process and thus as linked to and indicative of an inductive approach to the use of knowledge.

"When I think of reflective learning I think of the cycle in that you have perhaps a knowledge base which informs your practice and then from your practice you kind of sit back and think about what you have done and evaluate it and then that sort of informs you further." (Student respondent 4)

"It is a combination of doing, being able to explore it within – or after – the process in the context of theory, research, experience and then that influencing your future doings. And you've done it with a view to that." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"How have you responded/how would you respond? Let's put in another layer of what you now know from maybe a theoretical base. How does that affect your thinking? What hypotheses might you draw on now?" (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Reflective learning was seen as a more active and learner-centred approach to learning and development. For example:

"Ideally, I like to see students coming to supervision having thought for themselves what is most important for them to look at." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

And

"After all, they come to us as adult learners." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Self awareness on the part of learners and the explicit use of previous experience were also seen as characteristics of reflective learning. For instance:

"Understanding how your previous experiences, just the way you appear to families, and how that is influencing what you do and how they are responding to you is an important part of the process." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

■ Educator respondents (i.e. practice teachers and programme personnel) were unanimous in their perception that, whilst the competence-based approach may appear more in evidence in relation to agency-based practice learning, the reflective learning approach also characterizes this programme and thus that the two approaches are used throughout in a balanced manner:

"Although it seems like we only deal with the competences, the university is not satisfied with just that alone – there must be stuff also in a student's Portfolio that shows they have been reflecting and learning from it." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

"Competence in the sense of the six core competences is obviously important but it's only part of the picture. If we didn't also teach reflective learning we'd be turning out very ill equipped students." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

Student respondents, however, did not express such a uniform perception with one characterizing this programme in terms of balanced use of the two approaches, one in terms of the competence-based approach, one in terms of the reflective learning approach and saying that they did not know.

■ A view expressed by two (out of the five) practice teacher respondents was that the emphasis given to either - or a combination of – the two approaches depends upon the individual tutor. For example:

"It does depend on which tutor you have come out and see you because tutors have their own likes and dislikes." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"I feel like I've been given different messages at different times by the university staff." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

■ Moreover, reference was made to a sense of tension between, if not the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, then certainly the preferences of the university and agency bases. This was expressed as follows:

"If practice teachers are left to their own devices they would like to see it as a competence-based model, but I think that their view is the college expects there to be due recognition of the theoretical base which then has to permeate the whole of the practice, so I think quite often I have heard practice teachers say 'well, you know, we have to please the tutor' or 'we have to make sure that the academic learning is in there otherwise the college will be unhappy with us' so you see there is a tension out on the patch potentially." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

■ In comparison with other local social work qualifying programmes, this programme was perceived by practice teacher respondents as placing a greater emphasis upon the reflective learning approach:

"There is a distinct difference between.... XXX and XXXX, for instance. It takes about two weeks or three weeks to get the XXXX students to stop being driven by those core competences and to actually look at the opportunities for learning but the ones coming out of XXX are much more geared towards learning reflectively" (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"I prefer working with this course because they are really interested in reflection and not just bogged down in the competence framework the way they seem to be at XXXX. The difference shows in the students, it really does." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ The suggestion was made that the competence-based approach is built on by a more reflective learning approach.

"I think to begin with initially it was the competence based approach. It was very, very evident. But I think basically what we were trying to achieve is to build on a foundation from which you could start to build a framework from which to operate reflectively." (Student respondent 3)

"As a starting point, we may have a clearer understanding about competences because it is there in black and white. It is tangible in some ways so because of that, that might be where we would start." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I would definitely say that we use the competences as a foundation and then build up to more of an expectation of reflective learning." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ A further suggestion was that upon introduction, a new competence-based framework/set of requirements with its accompanying language and processes will appear dominant. But over time, with growing familiarity and the confidence that comes from this, such a framework can come to be used more creatively and in conjunction and harmony with the reflective learning approach:

"People were quite kind of stunned when the DipSW first came in and they were trying to get to grips with it – or avoid it which they couldn't do. Now it's more settled with everyone being calmer about what actually constitutes learning opportunities and evidence and there's more space to talk the language of reflection." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

Questions Cluster b. (Working together):

Can the two approaches work together, how/where in this programme can they be seen working/being used together, what might help them be used together (more) and is there a perception of conflict/contradiction between the two approaches?

■ All three respondent groups agreed that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches can be used alongside each other and in combination in the course of social work qualifying education. This is demonstrated as follows:

"I think they do work alongside each other." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"There is no reason why they can't both be used." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

"Absolutely. I think they do. For example, with observed sessions, you know, having the opportunity to get feedback and discuss their practice and then incorporate that into their own thought processes and developing a rationale about what they are doing with that particular competence and being able to have an understanding of what they are doing." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"I would probably argue that you can't have one without the other. I think they both inform each other really" (Student respondent 4)

However, the two approaches were not seen as synonymous:

"I think you have got to have both in that, you know, you have to be able to prove that you can do certain things but it is no good being able to do those things if you don't understand what doing those things means and what impact it has on the person you are working with ." (Student respondent 1)

"They are different, but equally important parts, of the whole, the business of teaching and learning about social work and assessing this." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

And possible tension between the two approaches was proposed by one respondent as follows:

"I think of there being an uneasy peace [between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches] *that reflects exactly what happens within social work: the debate that, you know, has gone on from time immemorial about theory and theory-less practice in social work – whether it is there or not there or whether anyone with common sense could do it, and what we mean by theory anyway. So I think those tensions, which have been kind of unresolved in social work as a profession, are very much in evidence within the DipSW."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

Further, the possibility of reflective learning requiring the investment of more time by both students and practice teachers was raised in the following responses:

"The thing is, you know that in practice they are not going to have the time to reflect all that much so you wonder if it's really fair to get them doing it as students – you know, when they've got so much more time to learn reflectively." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

And

"I think that the amount of time that we as practice teachers need is actually the minimum you can possibly do the job in. I could not do it in 1.5 hours a fortnight or whatever there is supposed to be." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

■ All respondents cited the need for the use of both approaches to be evident in the practice learning portfolio as an example of the approaches being used alongside one another by this programme. Three out of the five practice teacher respondents referred to their sense of responsibility to use both approaches in a balanced way in their work with students generally and the other two practice teacher respondents cited their management of student supervision and of direct observations as specific illustrations of where they feel they use both approaches. However, other than the practice learning portfolios,

neither student nor programme personnel respondents cited any aspects of agency-based practice learning (such as supervision) as illustrative of the simultaneous or combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within this programme. Instead, these respondents referred to university based seminars and small group teaching as examples of where this takes place – but without specifying how it occurs.

■ In response to a question as to what might be helpful in facilitating the use of the two approaches alongside one another (more), more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning involving the requirement for more directly observed student practice learning, was proposed by both student and practice teacher respondents. In addition to this, some practice teacher respondents suggested that their role could usefully shift from a more directive and traditional teaching style to a more facilitative one in which increased emphasis was placed upon supervision. Some programme personnel respondents suggested a need for more clarity as to what is understood as each of the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches. Also, that the development of reflective capacity by students could be distinguished as a specific principle of this programme.

■ No respondents, from any of the three respondent groups, perceived contradiction or conflict between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. For example:

"I don't think there was any point on the course where I felt, well these things are contradictory or in conflict." (Student respondent 2)

"I don't see them as being contradictory. I see them as the one being a useful tool and the other as an essential process that has to be gone through to be professional." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

■ However, this perception was qualified slightly, in different ways, by each of the respondent groups. By practice teacher respondents the importance of acknowledging a

difference between the two approaches and not treating them as synonymous was expressed:

"I don't think there is a contradiction though they are obviously two different models and that's got to be appreciated. You know, there is a skills one which is 'right, this is what you do' and 'now I can do it' and a reflection one which is 'well, let's have a think about it then'." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

Also

"There is a bit about 'is the practice safe and undamaging?' (competent) as much as 'is it creative and empowering?' (reflective) and there needs to be a balance." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

And

"Competence is much more prescribed by frameworks like the matrix. Reflective learning is much more flexible – maybe it starts where the framework stops." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

By student respondents, balanced use of the two approaches was perceived as significant:

"You need your tutor or practice teacher to be reminding you they're both there, not just focusing on one or the other – letting you think that being technically competent or a really deep reflector is enough on its own, because it's not." (Student respondent 2)

"Different tutors you can identify that come from a much more competence based approach and tutors that come from a reflective learning approach – they are very, very different styles." (Student respondent 4)

For programme personnel, there was a concern that the reflective learning approach they saw as used within the university may not be given equal emphasis within agency-based practice learning:

"Whilst we would advocate that it [reflective learning] *should be the essence of social work training, we can't always guarantee that it is part of their* [students'] *experience on placement."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"For me, the tension would be on how much weight - how much value – is put on the different elements [approaches] *and whether on placement the doing skills, and not the informing theoretical knowledge, is the priority."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

Questions Cluster c. (Practice Learning):

What elements of either/both approaches are needed to pass placements, emphasis within university-based placement preparation, preferences of practice teachers, emphasis within programme guidance re placements, perceptions of practice teachers as to student preferences, preferred term for practice learning, how role of practice teacher is seen, training of practice teachers?

■ Both practice teacher and programme personnel respondent groups agreed that student evidence of practice learning linked to competences only is not enough to achieve a pass mark for a period of agency-based practice learning. Further, these respondents agreed that the Portfolio produced by student and practice teacher, that outlines and illustrates the agency-based practice learning that has been engaged with, should demonstrate the student's reflective capacity as well as evidence of the required competences:

"They can have every box ticked but there is still something underlying which remains." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

And

"For me, evidence that something that shows each of the practice requirements has actually, physically been carried out is just the beginning. Then I expect to see a whole range of thinking around how things have been done in a particular way, why that is etc." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

This was explicated through the view, shared throughout these respondent groups, that a requirement for reflective learning is inherent in the way that competence is demonstrated and evidenced:

"The reflective learning is integrated into the practice and it is one big parcel if you like." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

And

"I don't really see how anyone can be said to be truly competent unless it's on the basis of their ability and willingness to reflect and develop through this also." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

For one practice teacher respondent, the use of a reflective learning approach was seen as imperative for 'survival' as follows:

"To go out there into the wide world and deal with the ever-increasing stresses and strains of being a social worker, they are not going to survive if they can't sit down about, you know, what is happening and the wider implications of this." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ However, an apparent contradiction emerged between what some programme personnel respondents felt should happen and their stated experience of the assessment of agency-based practice learning by students:

"If I am honest, I can think of Portfolios I have read where there really wasn't much more there than descriptions of practice mapped against the practice requirements. It's not ideal but it's what we sometimes get. And we certainly wouldn't necessarily fail those students." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

And further:

"I am not sure that we are explicit enough about the reflective learning bit, not as explicit as we are about the competences." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Student respondents also articulated unease that reflective learning is not prioritized in the assessment of student performance to the same extent as the competence-based approach. For example:

"Whether you would fail because you hadn't been particularly reflective in your practice analyses, I don't know really." and *"I think there is an emphasis on the competences."* (Student respondent 1)

■ Despite this concern that the competence based approach alone may be sufficient to enable a student to pass a period of agency-based practice learning, the point was also made that this, in and of itself, can be used as grounds for student failure:

"We try hard, if we have a student who we feel is failing, to have the evidence of this fit the boxes [practice requirements] .... *It is easier if a student is clearly falling down on one of the competences or, if not, we can shove our concern in the last one, the professional development one."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

■ One suggestion (from both a practice teacher and a student respondent) was that evidence of competence only is sufficient in the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning, but that evidence of reflective learning also is required in the course of the second (80-day) and final period.

■ In line with their expressed sense that the assessment of agency-based practice learning is dominated by the competence-based approach, three out of the four student respondents said they feel that the university-based preparation for this also emphasizes the competence-based approach. For instance:

"I think there is a big emphasis on the core competences there because, you know, you are given the matrix and shown that and you are given guidance and people get very hung up on it – you sort of think 'how on earth can I do that?' .... The fact that you have to evidence each one at least once seems to be the bench mark really." (Student respondent 1)

However, although practice teacher respondents felt unsure and said they were unaware of the precise content and process of the pre agency-based practice learning preparation of students, all programme personnel respondents were of the view that, in the course of this preparation, reflection is emphasised alongside demonstration of competence:

"It [the competence based framework] *is not a preoccupation. It's interesting because I get involved in delivering these pre-placement things and I think it is very clear in my talk that it is about good practice and reflection and competencies."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

Notwithstanding their expressed uncertainty as to the nature of this preparation, two out the five practice teacher respondents felt that their experience of students suggested a competence-based emphasis:

"It may not be that it [a competence-based approach] *is emphasised but they* [students] *know the word and they will talk about the matrix – you have a real difficulty in saying to them 'there is a piece of work that doesn't fit into your matrix but I want you to do it.' Students are so focused on completing this tick boxing and I hear more and more 'but that doesn't fit into my matrix' or 'what I need is some clients who can help me ...' so a client becomes a vehicle for the student."* (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

And, equally, two out of the five practice teacher respondents felt that their experience of students suggested a reflective learning emphasis:

"They [students] *definitely do understand the importance of learning through reflection so I guess there must have been that kind of input from the college. I would say they are not so concerned about the competence-based bit as they are to show they are reflective."* (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

However, only two of the five practice teacher respondents identified a clear emphasis within this programme's written guidance regarding agency-based practice learning (and this was upon a competence-based approach) with the remaining three perceiving both or neither of the two approaches being particularly emphasised. No practice teacher respondents offered any specific illustrations from the guidance in support of their views.

■ As in their responses to Question 3 regarding which, if either, approach is perceived as more in evidence within this programme, practice teacher respondents observed that a difference in emphasis appears to be demonstrated by different university-based tutors.

■ Student respondents were asked whether their practice teachers had appeared to them to demonstrate a particular preference for either of the competence-based or reflective learning approaches. Most student respondents perceived their practice teachers during the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning as having a more competence-based orientation and those during the second (80-day) period as giving a higher profile to the reflective learning approach. However, one student respondent commented that

whilst her 80-day practice teacher had adopted a competence-based approach in the main, he had appeared to focus heavily on reflective learning (and to use this in the context of theory-practice connections) during a supervision session wherein he was being observed and assessed himself.

■ Practice teacher respondents were asked whether in their view the students from this programme with whom they had worked had shown a particular preference for either of the two approaches. One respondent characterized students as having *'a leaning'* towards reflective learning within an overall balanced approach. All other practice teacher respondents perceived the competence-based approach as uppermost in student thinking in the sense that students have seemed keen to see their evidence 'grids' filled in. More able students were seen as managing the framework of competence-based requirements more reflectively and there was a generally agreed perception amongst practice teacher respondents that reflective learning is something that is worked towards – or up to – by students and that their preoccupation with the framework of competence-based requirements lessens as part of this process.

■ Three practice teacher respondents stated that they use the term 'practice learning' to describe student engagement with periods of agency-based practice learning and two said that they use the term 'placement'. One practice teacher respondent described them self as primarily assessing student practice (rather than student practice learning). All others emphasised their sense of responsibility for developing student capacity for learning and reflection as much as their role in gathering evidence of student competence.

■ All practice teacher respondents stated that they had undertaken specific training in preparation for assuming the role of practice teacher. Three had successfully completed the Practice Teaching Award, two of these having also undertaken an introductory 5-day course as a precursor. Two had undertaken the introductory 5-day training only. The length of time since either of these training opportunities had been undertaken varied between respondents from 9 to 3 years and all had been continuously involved in practice teaching since.

All who had undertaken the Award course felt that it had emphasized – and thus guided their orientation as practice teachers in terms of – the reflective learning approach. The two practice teacher respondents who had undertaken the 5-day introductory training only felt that this had emphasized the assessment of competence rather than the use of the reflective learning approach.

Questions Cluster d. (University-based teaching and assessment):

Modules in which either/both approaches particularly evident, forms taken by university-based assessment, marking schedules, programme guidance re assignments, perceptions of students as to own preferences?

■ Both student and programme personnel respondents said that the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches have been used jointly throughout the university-based taught modules. A module focusing on Social Work with Children and Families was cited as embodying a more clear emphasis upon reflective learning as were specific classes focusing upon Evaluation and upon Reflection. A modular sequence entitled 'Core Competences' that spans both years of this programme was proposed by student respondents as a particular example of university teaching and learning where combined use of the two approaches is evident. Student respondents noted, however, that such combined use of both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches was more readily discernable in Year Two teaching. Year Two teaching on Mental Health was cited, again by student respondents, as an exception to this apparently general rule, however, and was perceived as very competence-based.

Whilst one of the two agency-based programme personnel respondents asserted the joint use of the two approaches throughout the programme but did not offer any specific illustration of where or how this takes place, the other said they do not know about university-based teaching and so could not comment.

■ Within this programme, according to student and programme personnel respondents, university-based assessed work is mainly in the form of essays with Law being assessed by means of a 'seen' (take home) examination. The use of case studies within the

assessment context was also cited by these respondents. Both student and programme personnel respondents distinguished between formative and summative assessments by referring to presentations, group work and videoed role play exercises as quasi-formal assessment events, but ones which are not 'marked'(one programme personnel respondent pointed out, however, that feedback on their performance in these events is available to individual students upon request).

One of the two agency-based programme personnel respondents felt able to answer this question by referring to essays as the main vehicle for university-based student assessment but the other said they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment.

■ Student and programme personnel respondents said that the marking schedules for university-based assignments embody a combination of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches in that they require the demonstration of theoretical and/or research-informed knowledge together with reflective understanding. Student respondents commented not only that evidence of reflective learning is consistently required by assignment criteria but, further, that a distinction grade (70% and above) cannot be achieved without demonstration of this.

Again, one of the two agency-based programme personnel respondents said that they do not know about university-based assessments and so felt unable to comment beyond a perception that all such assessments require the integration of theory and practice.

■ In terms of this programme's general guidance for the completion of assignments, all programme personnel respondents (including those professing limited knowledge in this specific area) stated that this involves balanced integration of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, though with perhaps a slightly greater emphasis upon reflective learning. This was echoed by three out of the four student respondents but one student respondent felt that neither approach is explicitly evident within assignment guidance.

■When asked about their own individual preferred approach to learning, three of the four student respondents expressed a preference for the reflective learning approach and the fourth stated that, for them, both approaches are equally important.

Questions Cluster e. (Overall programme emphasis):
Emphasis within programme conscious and how this has come about, emphasis made explicit and, if so, how/where?

■ Overall, all programme personnel respondents felt that this programme consciously emphasizes combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Within this general consensus one university-based programme personnel respondent expressed the view that this programme places a very slightly greater emphasis upon the competence-based approach. However, an agency-based programme personnel respondent commented that this programme places a very slightly greater emphasis upon the reflective learning approach, or at least resists over-emphasising the competence-based approach:

"I think they got dragged into using the competence-based stuff. I mean, you sense the resistance to it all. It [this programme] *has always had a Masters element and that has been a strong, overriding theme."* (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

In terms of how this conscious emphasis has come about, neither agency-based programme personnel respondent felt they knew (despite both having been continuously involved with this programme since its inception).This lack of explicit awareness as to how or why this programme has developed in the manner in which it is perceived featured in all programme personnel respondent comments. However, one university-based programme personnel respondent suggested that:

"There is enough autonomy for individuals, working with common material, to be able to develop whichever or both emphases they wish to." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ The majority of programme personnel respondents stated that this programme's apparently conscious emphasis is made clearly evident - is written down, for example. Illustration of where this can be found was confined to agency-based practice learning, however. For instance, all programme personnel respondents saw agency-based practice learning documentation and guidance and related discussion arenas such as this programme's Examinations Board and Practice Assessment Panel meetings as the vehicles for making this programme's chosen emphasis explicit. The expectations of and feedback from this programme's external examiners were also referred to in this context. For example:

"Well, it's certainly a culture which is reflected in all the practice assessment panels – and in all my associations within exam boards and things." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

A further observation – and illustration of how this programme is seen as combining its use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches was that this programme's agency-based practice learning guidance clarifies the required competence areas but does not prescribe how these may be demonstrated:

"It feels as though this university's programme is less prescriptive than some within the locality and does give more autonomy. And there is a feeling of 'well, if I choose to do it this way or that way, they will be less likely to come back at me and tell me I have got it wrong than maybe another programme would be'. This has been interpreted by some practice teachers as encouraging reflective operation of their role." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

Questions Cluster f. (Relationship between approaches and professional identities):
Approaches seen as promoting different types of practitioners, which do employers prefer, does this influence style of practice teaching, where/who decides the programme outcome in terms of type of practitioner promoted?

■ Respondents within each of the respondent groups stated the view that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively promote different kinds of practitioners' professional identity. This is summarized by the following observation from a student respondent:

"I suspect the competency based approach leads to a more technically focused kind of practice, the idea of social work as a set of quite technical tasks that maybe can be learned in a technical way and that you can just demonstrate .... whereas reflective learning encourages more thoughtful and more flexible practice that accesses different theories and knowledge bases." (Student respondent 2)

■ Also across the respondent groups, the view was expressed that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work education and practice is inadequate. For instance:

" I would be very cautious about a practitioner who was solely – or even mainly – based on a competency-based model whereby they are seeing something quite narrow, a kind of tick box approach, and not being either reflective or critical about what they were doing." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

And

"I can think of people who absolutely go by the book in the sense that they seem completely preoccupied with procedures, paperwork, time scales etc. And whilst those things are important they are also pretty basic – they're really not to do with the art of

social work, if you like. And yes, I do think it starts with how you train – if when you're a student all you do is tick boxes, you're not learning to be any other way in practice are you?" (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ In addition, the suggestion was made that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work practice, deriving from a competence-based emphasis within education, may be dangerous for service users:

"It's too tick box. That isn't what my profession is like. It's just not enough and it would be dangerous, I think." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"I think to be a good practitioner, an aware practitioner, you have to be reflective in that if someone is just storming along without ever stopping to think about what they are doing and the impact it is having then something can go very wrong ..... if there is too much emphasis on just achieving competence then there is not so much accountability then." (Student respondent 1)

■ And also potentially dangerous for the competence-based practitioner themselves:

"They wouldn't survive would they? If anybody thinks you can survive social work, just on the basis of competence, they are going to be burnt out within the first two years." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

■ Again, respondents from each of the respondent groups made the suggestion that a predominantly competence-based social work education gives rise to practitioners who are more compliant/less challenging whilst more emphasis upon reflective learning could result in a more critical/assertive practitioner. And that reflective learning gives rise to practitioners who are more aware of and questioning of ethics and their own value bases:

"If we went purely competence-based we would actually be missing something about, you know, the real importance of being able to think more critically about social work and to challenge on that basis." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I think people who come from a reflective learning approach tend to be people who perhaps are more politicized, perhaps who have a kind of stronger emphasis on empowerment and take a wider view of social work and the role of social work in society and so on." (Student respondent 4)

"The more reflective students I've had, the ones who really want to work in that way and don't struggle with it, they are the ones who really think about their values and don't just fit the DipSW values in where they can for the sake of it. You see it in social workers as well. I can't see how it's ethical if you're not questioning where you're coming from yourself." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

- A perception expressed by programme personnel respondents was that reflective learning-educated practitioners would have and use a more in-depth knowledge base – and that this is indicative of professionalism:

"Putting your case forward, when you go into court for instance, you know, being able to talk about research and theory and, you know, show a thinking person behind what you are doing rather than that you have just been competent .... competency is not enough in a professional." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

And

"Let's face it, we all know social workers who are practically efficient and effective, know the available local resources etc. but who probably haven't looked at a piece of research or read a book since they were students. They know the ropes and how to use them but their practice just isn't knowledge-based. And I wouldn't say then that it's professional practice." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ Programme personnel respondents were asked where or by whom the outcome of this programme is decided upon in terms of the type of practitioner it educates for/prepares. All respondents replied that the university and partner agencies work closely together to ensure agreement as to this.

■ Practice teacher respondents were asked what kind of practitioner they think local employers prefer. Three expressed the view that local employers look for a rounded practitioner, combining both types of educational experience and related sense of professional identity. However, one of these three respondents commented that perhaps a slight preference exists for a reflective learning educated practitioner. The other two respondents said that, in their view, employers prefer more competence-based educated practitioners.

■ In terms of the influence, if any, that their sense of local employer preferences has upon their practice teaching approach, all practice teacher respondents stated their belief that exposure to the reflective learning approach is important for all students, notwithstanding the preferences of local employers ultimately. However, differing perceptions were also expressed in that for some respondents it is important to support students within their agency-based practice learning by ensuring they have the time and space seen as needed for reflective learning whilst by others it is seen as necessary to prepare students for limited workplace opportunities for reflective thinking and development by accordingly limiting the availability of time and space during the course of agency-based practice learning.

Questions Cluster g. (New social work qualification):

Involvement with preparation for new qualification and the emphasis within this, and respondents' preferred approach within new qualification?

■ Of the four programme personnel and five practice teacher respondents asked about their involvement to date with the planning by this programme for the new social work degree, only one practice teacher respondent reported any involvement – and this had

taken place at a regional rather than a programme-specific level. This respondents' sense at this point was that, at a regional level, planning seems to embody a predominantly competence-based emphasis. One programme personnel (agency-based) respondent said that they had been very involved in debates about whether a Masters social work qualifying programme should be retained within this region – and they are strongly in support of this.

■ All respondent groups were asked what they would wish the new social work degree programme to look like in terms of its use of the competence-based and the reflective learning educational approaches. Across the respondent groups the view was expressed that there is a need for a combination of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. This is demonstrated by the following:

"I think there needs to be a balance." (Student respondent 1)

"I think it has got to be an even balance between reflective learning and the competency based model." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"It really needs to be 50/50." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 3)

"Maybe it's because I'm so used to how things are now and I'm struggling to imagine something very different – but I really can't see how we can properly train and educate social workers without using both models." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 4)

■ Such combined use was seen as ideally embodying more emphasis than presently upon the reflective learning approach:

"It should emphasize more the reflective learning approach." (Student respondent 2)

And

"I suppose I worry really that the amount of effort that goes into reflective learning is down to individual students and their tutors and practice teachers and I would like the requirements for this to be strengthened and more clear so it's more across the board." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ However, maintenance of use of the competence-based approach was also expressed as important:

"I think we would derive some real benefit from having the competence-based bit as a sort of handle, to move them [students] *along and I think it would be a real shame to throw that out."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

But in a less mechanistic way than currently:

"The whole framework thing is so 'in your face'. It just doesn't help in thinking creatively – you get bogged down by all the requirements, and they seem so rigid. And I don't think, currently, it really helps students to integrate reflective learning." (Practice Teacher respondent 4)

■ Developmental suggestions in terms of the use of both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches were put forward by practice teacher respondents. With regard the competence-based approach it was proposed that an incremental focus on different areas of competence could result in less mechanistic application, as well as creating space for simultaneous use of the reflective learning approach:

"...a particular emphasis throughout the three placements on particular competences so there is more room for reflection." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

And practice teacher respondents were clear that they perceived a need for greater clarity – and more guidance – as to what actually constitutes the reflective learning approach:

"I would want students to have had a chance to know what the skills of reflective learning were. It is not something that just happens to you; it is a learned skill and it can be done much more creatively than saying 'go away and think about it.' I think sometimes when they come out on placement they [students] *really haven't been given practical demonstrations."* (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"I don't know whether you could map reflective learning out in a better way, whether there would be a way of giving more guidance to practice teachers on reflective learning." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"To be honest, I just wonder if I'm getting it right – the reflective bit – because you don't always feel very confident about that and then it's really easy to fall back on the competence-based stuff because, you know, there's the framework there for you and it's all really clear and you can just get on with that." (Practice Teacher respondent 5)

Summary:

To summarise, this case study report has presented the findings regarding the perceived relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches to social work education with reference to a 2-year full time DipSW/MA in Social Work programme. Data has been drawn from 16 individual interviews with a range of final year student, practice teacher, programme personnel and key informant respondents. In addition, a non-participant observation of a group tutorial meeting between 7 final year students and their university-based tutor has been undertaken.

All practice teacher respondents and some programme personnel expressed their understanding of a competence-based approach in terms of a vehicle for evidence-based assessment deriving from a breaking down of the role and tasks of social work into a

series of discrete elements. However, the majority of student respondents, together with some programme personnel, defined this approach more broadly and saw it as also encompassing reflective activity, the use of theoretical and research-based knowledge and a focus upon values and ethics. Whilst the practice teachers interviewed proposed the periods of agency-based practice learning as illustrative of where and how the competence-based approach is drawn upon within this programme, student and some programme personnel respondents identified it as also being present within university-based teaching and learning. A reflective learning approach was discussed by all respondent groups in terms of reflective practice and as an approach that requires learners to be self aware and self directed. Once again, practice teacher respondents pointed to agency-based practice learning as their example of where within the programme the use of a reflective learning approach can be seen whilst student and programme personnel respondents referred to its presence within the university-based component of the programme. All educator respondents asserted balanced use of the two approaches by this programme but student responses were more variable. An associated observation was that a competence-based approach is used within the programme as a foundation for social work learning which is then developed further through the medium of reflective learning. Additionally, it was suggested that different programme tutors favour use of the two approaches differently and that agency-based practice teachers favour a competence-based approach. This last was notwithstanding the positive expressions of interest in using a reflective learning approach that came from some practice teacher respondents.

Although the two approaches were not seen as synonymous by any respondents, all agreed that they can and should be used in conjunction (though disquiet was expressed by some programme personnel respondents that practice teachers may allow a competence-based approach to dominate agency-based practice learning). The illustrations put forward of where combined use of the two approaches can be found within this programme were: in practice learning portfolios (by all respondents), throughout the practice teaching undertaken with students (by practice teacher respondents) and in university-based seminars and other small group teaching (by student and programme personnel respondents). No contradiction or conflict between the two approaches was

expressed by any respondent though a potential for tension was acknowledged and certain essential differences between the approaches seen as important to keep in mind. Suggestions for improving the use of each approach alongside the other included more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning (also involving more direct observations of students), more emphasis by practice teachers upon facilitative student supervision (as opposed to directive teaching as to practice), greater clarity regarding the two approaches as educational models and the specifying of student development of reflective capacity as a distinct programme principle.

Both practice teacher and programme personnel respondent groups expressed the perception that, in the course of their agency-based practice learning, students need to provide evidence of both competence and reflective capacity in order to achieve a pass outcome. Having said this, some programme personnel respondents also expressed unease that, on occasion, predominantly competence-based evidence of student practice learning has been deemed sufficient to merit a pass. This was confirmed by student respondents whose view was that evidence of reflective learning is an ideal but not necessarily a requirement. Most student respondents described the university-based preparation for practice learning as mainly characterised by a competence-based approach whilst programme personnel respondents saw this as emphasising both approaches and practice teacher respondents said they did not have sufficient knowledge to comment. Practice teacher respondents' views as to any emphasis within the programme's written guidance for agency-based practice learning were variable and their perception, in the main was that programme students appear to have a preference for a competence-based approach. Student respondent perceptions, however, were that practice teachers appear to have a preference for a competence-based approach during the first of the two periods of practice learning but to draw more on a reflective learning approach during the second. Those practice teacher respondents who had completed the Practice Teaching Award felt that this had emphasised a reflective learning approach whilst those whose practice teacher training rested at an introductory level saw this as emphasising a competence-based approach.

Competence-based and reflective learning approaches were seen as used jointly throughout university-based modules by student and programme personnel respondents and specific examples were highlighted. For students, however, such joint use was more readily evident in second year modules. Essays were reported as the main form of university-based assessment and formative and summative assessment was distinguished. Both the programme's general assignment guidance and specific marking schedules were perceived to embody both approaches and student respondents associated the demonstration of reflective learning with higher marks. Agency-based programme personnel were not, in the main, able to discuss these programme aspects with confidence due to limited knowledge.

Whilst the overall view of programme personnel respondents was that this programme is conscious in its combined use of the two approaches, none felt able to say how this had come about. Most saw the programme's use of both approaches as an explicit feature but illustration of where (e.g. within programme documentation) this can be seen was confined to guidance relating to agency-based practice learning.

All respondent groups viewed sole or predominant use of either approach within pre-qualifying social work education as leading to specific – and very different – professional identity characteristics in emergent practitioners. The competence-based approach was perceived as giving rise to a preoccupation with procedural and technical knowledge and ability whilst the reflective learning approach was associated with a more questioning and assertive, and less compliant, form of practitioner who would be ready to critically appraise their value base. Mainly competence-based education and practice was seen as at best narrow and at worst dangerously limited. Reflective learning – leading to more reflective practice – was seen as promoting the use of a more theoretical knowledge base and this, in turn, was associated with professionalism within social work practice. Programme personnel respondents maintained that the university and local employing agencies consult closely in order to achieve consensus as to the programme outcome (in terms of the type of practitioners produced). Some practice teacher respondents stated that employers look for a balanced mixture of technical competence and reflective

capacity within practitioner professional identity whilst others believed employers to prefer more competence-based characteristics.

The group tutorial that was observed involved students being required, in turn, to provide a summary of their activities within their agency-based practice learning settings. Their response was to describe their experiences with reference not only to their progress – and in some cases with reference to the prescribed core competences – but also in terms of their individual personal development and the issues and questions that their practice learning has raised for them. Thus indicators of both competence-based and reflective learning thinking were apparent in the students' presentation. However, the tutor's responses did not appear to be aimed at engaging with the more reflective learning orientation displayed by students.

In conclusion, the new social work degree was seen by all respondent groups interviewed as needing to embody balanced use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches though, ideally, with greater emphasis upon and clarity as to what constitutes reflective learning than presently.

APPENDIX VII

CASE STUDY C REPORT

Introduction:

Programme C is a 2-year full time DipSW (and Diploma in Higher Education (Social Work)) course. In compiling this case study, one key informant source, who had been involved with this programme for more than six years, was used to provide a contextual overview of this programme. Individual interviews were carried out with: three programme personnel (one agency-based/two university-based), all of whom had been involved with this programme for more than five years; three practice teachers, who had worked with this programme for between four and seven years and who had also successfully completed the Practice Teaching Award; and three students each of whom were close to the end of their final year of this programme and had completed their 80-day period of agency-based practice learning. One observation was undertaken involving a university-based tutor (not also interviewed) and eight final year students (none of whom were also interviewed). All participants volunteered to be involved in the research exercise following contact with and invitations from the researcher.

Within this UK region, Programme C is one of four qualifying social work programmes offered by different Higher Education institutions. Each of these other programmes provide the DipSW award as part of undergraduate social science degree courses and thus Programme C represents the only regional opportunity to achieve the DipSW within a two year period. Programme C is offered on the basis of on the basis of an arrangement between this university and several different neighbouring Local Authorities that have agreed to provide agency-based practice learning opportunities to programme students.

Qualifying social work education programmes have been provided by this university for some thirty five years. The current DipSW programme has been in existence since 1993 and is validated for up to 70 students per annual intake. Approximately one third of these

students are employees of partner agencies who have been seconded. Both seconded and direct entry students engage with the same teaching and learning on a full time basis. Programme 3 is located within a Faculty of Health and Social Care that, as well as social work education provides an extensive range of vocational diploma and degree courses leading to specific professional qualifications in aspects of health care and community work.

Programme C provides a general programme handbook, a guide to the Year One and Two social work placements and a module handbook for each of these years, detailing the content of and teaching arrangements for each of the modular sequences that make up the programme. Within this documentation, no overall programme aim beyond the attainment by students of the DipSW award and no specific references to teaching and learning processes beyond the arrangements for each module are made. However, the programme handbook, in its introduction to students, states: 'Each of you will come to the programme with different experience, knowledge, understanding and skills .... what you learn on the DipSW programme will depend as much on you and other students as it does on us as teaching staff.'

Key informant 1 described Programme C as follows: *"It's a balance; we offer a mix of competence-based education aimed at meeting occupational and employers' requirements and more critically-based learning opportunities that try to get students to really think about who they are in relation to their social work practice, to be reflective practitioners."*

The composition and structure of Programme C is outlined in the following table:

Structure of Programme C

Year One	Year Two
Interprofessional Module 1 (Social Policy, Public Health and Collaborative Working) *Interprofessional module*	Interprofessional Module 2 (Skills for/Infrastructure of Professional Practice and Reflective Practice) *Interprofessional module*
Preparation for Study and Practice (the 6 DipSW Core Competences and Values and Reflective Practice) *Uniprofessional module*	Personal and Professional Development (Use of Theory in Practice, Research Methods and Sources and Anti-oppressive Practice) *Uniprofessional module*
Foundations in Psychology and Social Science *Interprofessional module*	EITHER: Social work with Children and Young People *Uniprofessional module* OR: Working with Adults in the context of Community Care *Interprofessional module*
Anti-oppressive Practice and the Law *Uniprofessional module*	Law, Justice and Equality *Uniprofessional module*
50-day Social Work Placement (Block)	80-day Social Work Placement (Block)

Interprofessional module = a module where social work students are taught and learn alongside students from a range of other disciplines and programmes within the Faculty including BSc (Hons) courses in Adult and Children's Nursing, Learning Disability, Mental Health, Midwifery, Physiotherapy and Radiotherapy and a Diploma course in Community and Youth Work.

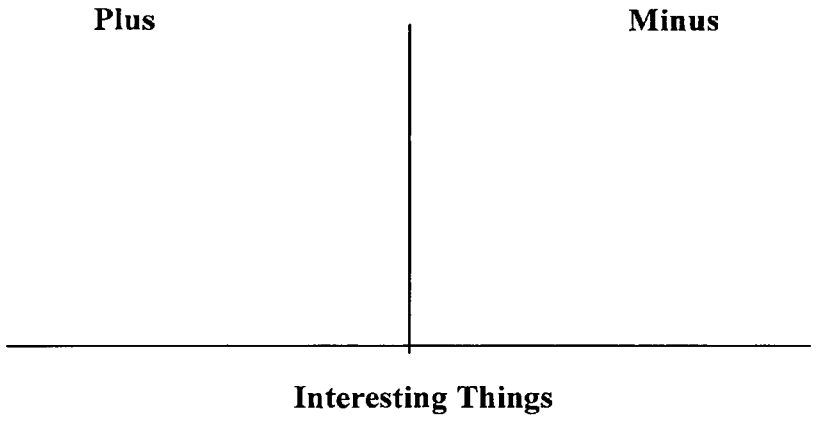
Uniprofessional module = a module where social work students are taught and learn in a single disciplinary group i.e. with other DipSW students only.

Observation of student tutorial:

The tutor began by proposing the following agenda for the meeting: any current outstanding issues for students, student evaluation of the tutorial support available to them during their agency-based practice learning, and the negotiation and arrangement of individual tutorial meetings for those students wishing these. She then informed the group: *'This is our last group contact but it's not goodbye forever; I will be available for placement support until the end of the course and then for the partying and celebrations.'*

Student 4 asked: '*What are we evaluating exactly?*' Student 6 then commented: *'Some of the content of the course has been appalling – but I can't write that down, of course.'* The tutor responded by asking the whole group: *'What is the purpose of evaluation? Why do we evaluate?'* Student 3 suggested: *'To improve? And therefore it should be constructive?'* Murmurs and nods of agreement came from the students sitting closest to Student 3.

The tutor then said: *'Suppose we look at this'* and introduced the following diagram (using the flip chart) as a structure for evaluating, noting: *'This comes from de Bono; the guy who coined the idea of lateral thinking*[6]:



Having drawn this on the flip chart, the tutor said: *'It's often helpful to start with Interesting Things and then see if any of these can be put into the Plus or Minus columns.'* She added: *'Evaluation forms are useful, but if their content is non-specific then no discussion is possible.'* Student 7 said: *'Yes, but I know that to pass this course I have to write to and meet certain evaluation criteria – and that's what I'm going to do.'* Again, students sitting nearby endorsed this comment with nods and murmured agreement. Student 4 asked: *'Do we evaluate the whole course?'* This met with general

[6] Edward de Bono (1933 -), an applied psychologist who has developed a range of 'deliberate thinking methods' aimed at stimulating conscious, systematic thought. Author of 'The Use of Lateral Thinking' (1967).

agreement from the other students in the group. However, the tutor stated: *'I think you could have a discussion about that next time you're in college. Can we check up on any outstanding issues or queries any of you have?'*

Student 3 asked if practice teachers are required to sign their confirmation of students' full attendance at their practice learning opportunity and other students told her that this is so. Student 4 commented that there appeared to be a confusing range of feedback forms in the Portfolio handbook and this lead to an outbreak of discussion amongst the students – and Student 3 realising that a new and different handbook to the one that she had been referring to had been issued. Student discussion moved on to debate as to which days within the programme calendar are considered annual leave, 'college work' days and 'placement' days. The tutor intervened and summarised with: *'So it sounds like the outstanding issues you have are of a practical nature and to do with things like Portfolio requirements. Please bring these up with me in our individual sessions.'*

The tutor then gestured at the de Bono diagram and asked students to comment on the *'pros and cons as you see them.'* Student 3 said: *'As our tutor you've always really been there. Like, always available to deal with placement issues.'* The tutor asked if her freelance working status had compromised this at all and Student 5 said: *'I think it's been good actually because we see you as a bit detached and independent from the university. But you've always stuck inside your role and your boundaries.'* Student 6 commented: *'I've got more information and understanding about university requirements from you than I have from the staff here.'* The tutor acknowledged and noted this feedback in the Plus column of the diagram and suggested a possible Minus arising from her freelance status in terms of students not having instant access to answers or information from the university i.e. students would have to wait for her to follow up their queries with university staff. Student 5 said: *'No – it's better to ask your question and wait for an answer than it is to not be able to contact anyone.'* Student 6 said: *'I'm very critical of the university generally and therefore you as a tutor have been pretty good.'* Student 8 was asked directly by the tutor for his comments but he replied that he had nothing to add.

Students 1, 2 and 3 then began to talk to one another about two teaching sessions at the beginning of Year 2 that they referred to as *'PPD'*. Comments included: *'Wasn't that supposed to be about theory and reflection and stuff?'* (Student 1) and *'That ended up just being about placements didn't it?* (Student 2). Student 3 observed that these sessions had not culminated in: *'Any outcomes or action plans or anything'* and then suggested that the tutor could perhaps usefully have been introduced to students at that point. Student 4 noted that their tutor group (of seconded students) had been offered an additional taught session by a university-based tutor, looking specifically at the requirements for the 80-day period of practice learning and that it would have been useful if their tutor had been linked in to this.

Student 6 commented that he had liked the tutor's tendency to use visual strategies such as today's diagram and that he had welcomed the opportunities afforded by the tutor group to discuss *'placement issues'* with others. Student 4, nodding her agreement, said: *'I wish there had been more time on recall days to learn from each other somehow – the days always seem to have been pretty tightly structured with lectures.'* The tutor began noting these observations on the flip chart diagram whilst a few students commented to one another that they would have valued more time and opportunities for peer support and sharing of information and learning and Student 2 suggested: *'We could have cross-read each other's Portfolios couldn't we?'* Student 5 said: *'We've been lectured at and I just feel it's been a huge waste of the wealth of experience there is among students.'* Student 7 said: *'Lots of the course has been a huge waste of time. Five or six weeks on research? It's not useful – I can't see the point.'* Student 4 stated: *'This placement has been a huge amount of learning, though.'* Many students nodded their agreement to this and Student 4 continued: *'I want to demonstrate this but I've really struggled with the how of this. I mean, you know, critical reflection and appraisal. <u>How</u> do you reflect on your work and learn from this?'* Student 5 responded: *'We've not been reflecting in lectures or other groups, other than here. It's been a chance for consolidation that has been lost.'* Student 6 said: *But this course is just about a bit of paper isn't it? We've got to remember that. <u>Now</u>* [i.e. post qualification] *we'll start to learn from practice.'* The

tutor responded to these comments by mentioning various post qualifying training opportunities such as practice teaching and PQ Awards and telling the group: *'You're right to view where you are now as merely the beginning – there is so much more out there that you can access so that you go on developing.'*

Student discussion returned to the issue raised earlier by Student 7 of teaching input around research in social work and there was general agreement that this had not seemed immediately relevant. Student 7 summarised with: *'I can see it's necessary – but maybe at PQ level; not as part of the basic DipSW.'* Student 6 observed: *'I'm a bit sceptical that it was more to do with the lecturer's special interest than it was to do with our need.'*

Student 5 commented: *'I would say that a lot of our needs have been kind of overlooked.'* and this lead on to a general student discussion around the difficulty of being in the role of student (for the purposes of practice learning) in agency settings where individuals were already known in their employed capacity. Comments on the 50-day practice learning experience included: *'Nobody recognised us as students'* (Student 1) and *'We were just working.'* (Student 4). The tutor asked: *'Do you remember when we were doing learning objectives* [for the 80-day period of practice learning] *and I was encouraging you to have that as an objective – how to be a student?'* Students indicated their agreement to this and there was general agreement among them that the 80-day practice learning period had been *'better'*, *'easier'*, *'much more about learning'*.

The tutor noted that the session time was close to finishing and reminded the students that a further evaluative opportunity for them was to use 'placement evaluation' forms. She asked if people were ready to finish. Student 4 said that it would be interesting to know what others in the group were doing in terms of jobs and the tutor replied: *'Are you proposing that as a way of ending the session? Because we haven't really got time now. Is that something you can do over coffee?'* Some students nodded agreement and this ended the group tutorial meeting. Some students then waited in turn to book individual appointments with the tutor whilst others left the room.

Interview Data:

Questions Cluster a. (Understandings and illustrations):

Imagery/understanding(s) of competence-based and reflective learning approaches respectively, how/where each is to be found within this programme and whether either is thought to be predominantly in evidence on this programme?

■ Responses from each of the three respondent groups indicated that respondents strongly associate the competence-based approach with the periods of agency-based practice learning that form part of the DipSW qualification. For instance:

"My first thought is the six core competences and practice requirements we teach on placement." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"It's what we do on placement." (Student respondent 1)

"Practice is not the only example, but possibly the main or clearest one where we use this approach." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

Whilst for Practice Teacher respondents, the key illustration of where use of the competence-based approach may be seen within this programme was agency-based practice learning as above, student and programme personnel respondents also referred to the use of the competence-based approach within the context of university-based teaching and learning as follows:

"If you look at the learning outcomes for the different modules that you get at the beginning, you can see, I think, that they're really talking about kinds of competences too." (Student respondent 1)

"It would be through the learning outcomes of each module, academically." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ The perception of the competence-based approach as a breakdown of and to do with 'specific areas/elements' of social work was also expressed across the three respondent groups:

"It takes apart the whole business, really, and breaks it down into what we need to be looking for." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"It helps by breaking down and showing you what you've got to do." (Student respondent 1)

"It defines the different functions of social work and, within these, highlights particular aspects that need to be understood by students." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ A view of the competence-based approach as a reductionist and fragmented approach was put forward by one practice teacher respondent only in the following terms:

"I just get very frustrated by this idea that you can take a student and teach them about social work as a job through this kind of splitting down of everything into so many competences and so many requirements etc.. To me, it's dumbing down what is a really very complex profession." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

But was also perhaps implicit in the following description by a student respondent:

"The endless detail of the requirements in each of the main areas of social work." (Student respondent 3)

■ Both practice teacher and programme personnel respondents discussed the competence-based approach as fairly centrally to do with assessment and with standards - more so than as an approach to teaching and learning. For example:

"It is really to do with giving you benchmarks for assessment of students and for covering all bases in this." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"We have to have a way of knowing if students are capable of these aspects of social work." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"Even if it seems laborious, it's very reassuring from an employment perspective to know that students have been assessed as fit to practice through it." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

■ Moreover, across the three respondent groups the competence-based approach was very much seen as linked to and emphasizing the notion of evidence and evidence-based assessment of student performance and capability:

"Students have to show you they can do something, not just talk about it." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

"We have to provide evidence, you know, in writing or be observed so our practice teachers know we're up to it." (Student respondent 2)

"And the approach requires clear evidence [of student *performance*] *that can be looked at by a range of people, not just the practice teacher going it alone."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

However, there was no indication from any respondents that the competence-based approach is seen as empowering or enabling of students either in terms of the power relations between learners and teachers/assessors.

■ What was suggested, however, was that this emphasis upon the production of evidence may lead to learning being undertaken primarily to evidence required areas of

competence rather than in response to a student's particular developmental needs or interests or simply for its own sake. This is shown in the following responses:

"You do have to be looking out all the time for if what you're doing meets the competences and if it doesn't it seems like a bit of an indulgence." (Student respondent 1)

And

"There is certainly the need to think ahead and plan work for students that'll mean they can show the competences, not just let them do what comes in or even what they're interested in particularly. I had a student who was really into policy and organizational stuff like that and I had to rein him back because I needed him to be looking at the other stuff as well." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

■ One practice teacher respondent commented on the time-specific nature of the DipSW framework of competences and noted:

"When you think about it, it's only about how we see social work now, under the DipSW, and that has probably evolved already and will change again." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

■ One student respondent referred to the competence-based approach as providing foundational learning from which to develop:

"It's the basics isn't it or a baseline, I mean and hopefully we'll build on it and develop further and then look back and see 'Oh, that was the stuff I needed to know at the beginning and is my foundation of my practice'." (Student respondent 1)

■ Reflective learning was seen, across the three respondent groups, as an analytical and critical approach as can be seen from the following illustrative responses:

"This is where I think there is much more exploration of why an approach has been taken, what it means and if it could have been done differently – and then looking at that also." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"If you just follow the set tasks in the competences, you don't necessarily think about why you're doing what you're doing in the way you are so I think the reflective helps with this." (Student respondent 1)

"It would be an approach that encourages the learner to critically analyse their practice and then develop from that basis." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ These responses also show a connection being made by respondents from each of the respondent groups between the reflective learning approach and the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students. Respondents from each group illustrated the use of reflective learning within this programme by referring to the reflective written commentaries that form part of the student-produced practice learning portfolio. Whilst practice teacher respondents and the agency-based programme personnel respondent referred only to the agency-based practice learning context (and in terms of the reflective written commentaries) as illustrative of the use by this programme of the reflective learning approach, university.-based programme personnel respondents described *'most'* essays as explicitly requiring the demonstration of *'reflection'*. Both student and university-based programme personnel respondents mentioned university-based classroom discussion and tutorial meetings as promoting reflection but did not refer to any specific modules/courses. Student respondents referred to reflective learning *"as a kind of constant stream"* (Student respondent 1) and as *"always there"* (Student respondent 3) throughout university-based teaching and learning within this programme but, again, did not provide particular examples of this in terms of modules/courses (or of teaching and learning strategies).

■ Reflective learning was seen as linked to – even synonymous with - reflective practice not only by practice teacher and student respondents but also by programme personnel:

"Isn't it to do with reflective practice?" (Student respondent 2)

"It's about being a reflective practitioner." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"Yes, certainly we value students developing as reflective practitioners" (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"For me, this would be very much linked to reflective practice." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Furthermore, practice teacher and programme personnel respondents expressed a perception of a link between reflective learning and an inductive approach to the use of knowledge:

"I think this is an approach that helps students develop their knowledge base from looking at real practice situations rather than more academic, abstract learning that they might come out and try to put into practice." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"We would want to encourage students to learn from practice, not just in experiential terms but as well in terms of deriving knowledge from practice." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"Kind of more than practice wisdom, sort of drawing out from the situation the theory that is relevant." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ Reflective learning was also seen as a more active and learner-centred approach to learning and development:

"I would expect that a reflective student is one who would come to supervision with a whole agenda of things they've identified for themselves." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

And

"I like anything reflective that gets them [students] *thinking for themselves and having more enquiring minds really."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ Respondents discussed the reflective learning approach as incorporating self-awareness on the part of the learner, but no mention was made of the use of previous experience:

"How a student thinks about and knows themselves must have an enormous impact on their practice and reflective processes are so important here." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"Recognition of the part played by and the impact of self are so crucial. These are crucial messages for students, promoted by reflective learning as part of that process of self awareness." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■By some practice teacher and programme personnel respondents and by all student respondents, the reflective learning approach was understood in terms of anti-oppressive practice and ideas of criticism and challenge of existing arrangements (at personal, cultural and structural levels):

"Students who are more reflective are usually the ones who want to question agency practice – why we do things the way we do – and to question what's going on. It can be stimulating." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"Being reflective is more to do with not just accepting things unquestioningly but being prepared to stand up and ask questions." (Student respondent 3)

"I think you have to reflect before you can practice anti oppressively." (Student respondent 2)

"Reflective learning is a process of critique, of using theory critically and not being prepared to accept teaching as dogma." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Educator respondents (i.e. practice teachers and programme personnel) said that, whilst the competence-based approach may be seen as more in evidence in relation to agency-based practice learning, the reflective learning approach is also seen a characteristic of this programme. For example:

"It's the core competences, of course, that seem to get a higher profile but that doesn't mean that reflective work is neglected on this course – I don't think it is at all." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

And

"I think there is always the expectation that students demonstrate reflective learning as well as deal with the competences." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

Educator respondents also expressed a sense of balance use of the two approaches by this programme:

"We probably do quite well at holding on to both of them." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

And

"No. I wouldn't say that one is at the expense of the other here." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

By student respondents, however, such balance was not uniformly perceived with two citing balance but one citing the competence-based approach as more evident within this programme.

■ Although tension between the two approaches was not explicitly referred to, there was a sense in the responses from agency-based respondents (both practice teachers and programme personnel) not only that their own work with students is most explicitly competence-based but also that use of a reflective learning approach is expected by the university. This can be seen in the following

"You're always aware, you know, as a practice teacher, that the reflective stuff is something the university is expecting to see." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"Probably on a day to day basis, practice teachers do have heightened awareness of the core competences – because these are what they must cover – but I think they do recognize that the college won't just accept this and also need to see evidence of reflection." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

■ The issue of time, and particularly the relative brevity of the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning were seen by one practice teacher respondent as resulting in the evidencing of competences being prioritized.

■ The suggestion was also made that, upon introduction, a new competence-based framework or set of requirements with its accompanying jargon and procedures will appear dominant. But over time, with growing familiarity and the confidence that comes from this, such a framework can come to be used more creatively and in conjunction and harmony with the reflective learning approach:

"It was hard, it was really hard, to get your head round it all when the DipSW first was introduced. But, you know, you grapple with this stuff over time and get used to it and it starts to make its own kind of sense. I think it might be true that there was an over-emphasis on competence-based stuff at the beginning [of the DipSW] *but I wouldn't see that now. I think reflection is appreciated as equally important."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

Questions Cluster b. (Working together):

Can the two approaches work together, how/where in this programme can they be seen working/being used together, what might help them be used together (more) and is there a perception of conflict/contradiction between the two approaches?

■ The three respondent groups were in agreement that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches can work together and in combination within social work education programmes. This is shown by the following observations:

"I couldn't teach a student any of the practice requirements without using ideas of reflective learning." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"I think they sort of go hand in hand in that you have to reflect to know what you're demonstrating and how you're doing it." (Student respondent 1)

"We would not expect students to demonstrate their competence – in either the university or the practice settings – by simply explaining what they have done and claiming that this means they have met a particular practice requirement. We would always expect to see students reflecting in this process." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"The two approaches do need to be used in a dual kind of way if the whole education experience is going to have any meaning." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

However, the distinct nature of each of the two approaches was recognized and they were not seen as synonymous:

"I would think of them as the opposite sides of the same coin." (Student respondent 1)

And

"Obviously they are really different approaches aren't they? There's the quite practical description stuff when a student shows that they are working effectively and then there's the more thoughtful bits around why they did something in a particular way and what they think about it." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

■ All respondents illustrated the dual and simultaneous use of the two approaches by this programme by referring to the need for evidence of both within the practice learning portfolio. Two out of the three practice teacher respondents said that they feel it is their responsibility to not only draw on both approaches but also to ensure that they balance their use of these respectively in their work with students. Furthermore, two out of the three practice teacher respondents cited student supervision during agency-based practice learning as an example of where such dual and balanced use occurs. Programme personnel and student respondents referred only to the practice learning portfolios, however, as illustrative of the combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within the agency-based practice learning context.
In addition, student respondents mentioned seminars and other university-based teaching/learning opportunities such as structured small group discussions as examples of where they think dual use of the two approaches happens on this programme. However, student respondents gave these responses in relation to practice learning i.e. referred to university-based consideration of agency-based practice learning experiences. Only programme personnel (and only the university-based respondents) referred to learning other than agency-based practice learning and cited seminars, small group teaching and tutorials emphasising personal and professional development as illustrative of the combined use by this programme of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

■ When asked what they thought might be helpful in facilitating the use of the two approaches alongside one another (more), both student and practice teacher respondents proposed more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning and that these

should involve more directly observed student practice. One student and one practice teacher respondent suggested that agency-based practice learning supervision could be managed differently i.e. could promote reflection by students more and focus less on procedural matters. One student and one university-based programme personnel respondent expressed the view that students need to feel more able to challenge and be critical within their agency-based practice learning settings and seemed to feel that this would promote - or be indicative of - joint use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. However, two of the three programme personnel respondents said they were either unable to think of anything that would enable or enhance dual use of the two approaches and/or they felt no changes within this programme are needed.

■ Neither conflict nor contradiction between the two approaches were perceived by programme personnel nor practice teacher respondents, nor by student respondents. For example:

"Of course they are not in conflict. How can they be when the two things: competence and reflection are what add up to effective social work?" (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

And

"Reflection and competence - they are definitely tied together in a kind of reciprocal relationship." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ However each respondent group expressed certain provisos to this. For instance, one student respondent who had discussed reflective learning as a critical approach involving challenge of the status quo, questioned whether this is in fact possible for students being assessed, particularly within agency-based practice learning settings.

One practice teacher respondent expressed a tension, for practice teachers, between simultaneously enabling reflection and assessing competence arising from prescribed and required areas of competence driving the practice learning:

"It's understandable when you think about it, but it is a tough challenge for practice teachers when they get students who are very focused on what they've got to do as requirements and then the whole placement experience gets constructed around these and there is less interest in, attention for reflection – because it's not seen as a requirement in the same way." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

For university-based programme personnel respondents, there was the concern that a reflective learning approach, although used within the university setting, may not be given equal emphasis within agency-based practice learning:

"What we see as so important within college may not be viewed in the same way in practice agencies taking our students. I'm not always happy, I think, that reflection is given the centrality that I would like to see it taking." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

And

"I would see one possibility for problems lying with different prioritizing between college and placement. I mean you've always got to make sure that it's not competence being emphasized in the agency and reflection in the college." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ A further possible tension articulated by practice teacher respondents revolved around a concern that a student could potentially evidence all areas of competence and pass the period of agency-based practice learning, whilst having limited ability to reflect. This was expressed as follows:

"Well, I think it is possible - in fact, to be honest, I can think of at least one student I've been involved with – where the student is really quite good, pretty efficient really, in tagging the practice requirements. So you end up thinking 'well, OK' and signing them

off but you're still left knowing that that student hasn't done much reflecting at all. They've just been kind of astute in seeing where they can tag the various practice requirements in their work." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

And

"I definitely think that the competence-based stuff invites students to just, well, describe what they're doing rather than really show that they've been thinking about it. And then what can you do? Here is a student with all their evidence so it's hard to then say that that isn't enough." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ By programme personnel, student and practice teacher respondents, balanced use of the two approaches was seen as important, with conflict arising where imbalance occurs:

"For me, my worry, if you like, would be around one or the other becoming over-used – so you've got someone who's super-competent or highly reflective but not both. And I suppose we aim for practice teachers to be keeping that in check so there's always a balance." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

"They do need to be used in the same kind of proportions, though." (Student respondent 1)

"It's a problem and then maybe a conflict, I think, if you've got lots of reflection going on which may all be interesting but where the student isn't actually evidencing the competences – and then the other way round too, I suppose." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

Questions Cluster c. (Practice Learning):

What elements of either/both approaches are needed to pass placements, emphasis within university-based placement preparation, preferences of practice teachers, emphasis within programme guidance re placements, perceptions of practice teachers as to student preferences, preferred term for practice learning, how role of practice teacher is seen, training of practice teachers?

■ Both programme personnel and practice teacher respondents stated that student evidence of agency-based practice learning simply linked to or mapped against required competences is not enough for the student to achieve a pass mark for the period of agency-based practice learning. Moreover, these respondents agreed that the practice learning portfolio produced by student and practice teacher that outlines and illustrates the practice learning that has been engaged with should demonstrate the student's reflective capacity as well as evidence of the required competences:

"If we get a student who's SAPS [Student Analysis of Practice i.e. reflective commentary] *really don't show enough, or enough quality, reflection then we might, at the interim point, ask them to do more. We just can't accept descriptions of practice and claims about things without also seeing how the student went about their decision making, why they used particular knowledge, how their values informed them etc."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

And

"I would be very unhappy about passing a student who has produced a really descriptive Portfolio, no matter how neatly each of the practice requirements may seem to have been covered by the work they discuss." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ This position was expanded upon by the view put forward by all programme personnel respondents and by one student respondent that a requirement for reflective learning is inherent in the way that competence is demonstrated and evidenced:

"To show true competence, the reflective thinking that the student has done, both before and after the event, has to be there." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Notwithstanding these observations, a seeming contradiction emerged between what respondents felt should happen and the unease articulated by both student and practice teacher respondents that reflective learning is not prioritized in the assessment of student performance:

"I think a lot of the time, even though reflection gets talked about, it's the evidence of competence that really counts. After all, that's what you must have." (Student respondent 2)

And

"At the end of the day if a student has got all the practice requirements evidenced and it's not too basic, you know, they've shown that they have been thinking about what they're doing, that's probably enough." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

■ However, programme personnel respondents were unanimous in the view that a clear and significant reason for student failure of agency-based practice learning is inadequate evidence of enough reflection:

"Probably the main reason for failure, after the obvious cases of dangerous or damaging practice, would be that the Portfolio simply does not demonstrate reflection by the student." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

■ A suggestion put forward by a student respondent was that evidence of competence only is enough in the first (50-day) period of agency-based practice learning, but that evidence of reflective learning also is required from the second (80-day) and final period.

■ And a practice teacher respondent referred to the absence of a clear and shared structure for assessing reflective learning in the following terms:

"It would be better, much easier for students and practice teachers, if we had a framework for reflection like we have for the practice requirements. That's so useful in making sure you're covering what you're supposed to but when it comes to reflection – that's different things to different people." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

■ Student perceptions as to whether this programme's preparation of students for their periods of agency-based practice learning emphasizes both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches more or less equally, or one more than the other, were mixed:

"I would say it's competence that really gets pushed." (Student respondent 2)

"Well, what I remember is all the practice requirements. You know, the whole framework of what has to be evidenced. And quite a lot of discussion about that really – making sure we knew what we had to do." (Student respondent 3)

"I think a lot of people got quite, you know, almost frozen by it, by the whole framework. And we often seemed to get bogged down by people worrying about whether they could do it all. But I do think there was a definite message that we couldn't just go out there and say 'I've done this and I've done that so that's my competences met then'. We were definitely being told that there is more to it than that." (Student respondent 1)

■ However, all programme personnel respondents were of the view that reflection is emphasized alongside demonstration of competence in the course of this preparation. For example:

"I would hope that they [students] *are understanding that the placements are not just about the practice requirements and getting those ticked off but are also about so much more. And we do emphasise, I think that to be competent they have to develop their capacity for reflection."* (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

Whilst two out of the three practice teacher respondents said they felt unsure and unable to comment on this aspect of this programme and one stated that that he believed there to be balanced use of the two approaches but could not be certain of this.

■ Although each of the three practice teacher respondents expressed the view that this programme's written guidance regarding agency-based practice learning draws upon and emphasizes both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches in equal measure, none of these respondents offered specific illustration(s) as to where this is demonstrated.

■ Student respondent perceptions of the preferences (for balanced used of the two approaches or for one more than the other) of the practice teachers they had encountered during this programme were varied in that one student felt their practice teachers had balanced the two approaches, one felt that theirs had appeared to favour the competence-based approach and one commented that their practice teachers did not seem to understand, or to have received guidance regarding, reflective learning (the implication here being that the competence-based approach had dominated in consequence).

■ Two out of the three practice teacher respondents perceived the preferences (for balanced used of the two approaches or for one more than the other) of the students from this programme with whom they had worked as being clearly for the competence-based approach to learning and development. The third practice teacher respondent did not feel that a particular preference had been demonstrated by the students they had encountered. However, all practice teacher respondents stated that in their experience students from this programme are keen to 'tick off' or 'fill in' the framework of competence requirements and the suggestion was made that less able students focus upon and become preoccupied by this competence-based framework of practice requirements, whilst more able students demonstrate a more reflective capacity. It was also suggested that reflective learning is something that is worked towards – or up to – by students and that part of this is becoming less preoccupied with a competence-based framework.

■ One practice teacher respondent described her work with students in terms of 'practice learning' and felt that she has come to use this term as a result of her participation in discussions regarding the new social work degree. This respondent described her role as being to facilitate and assess a student's capacity to learn and/or to reflect as well as to gather evidence of student competence. Both the other practice teacher respondents used 'placement' to describe the periods of agency-based practice learning undertaken by students. These respondents described themselves as responsible primarily for assessing student practice.

■ Each of the practice teacher respondents stated that they had successfully completed the Practice Teaching Award. One had done so 6 or 7 years previously, one 5 years previously and one 3 years previously.
One practice teacher respondent felt unable to remember whether this preparatory training had particularly emphasized either of the competence-based or reflective learning approaches, or a combination of the two, but both others said that they felt the impression they had gained from this training was that their primary task was to assess competence via the practice requirements rather than reflective learning. For instance:

"What I took away from it definitely was that whatever else we did with the students, we had to make sure the competences were covered. That had to be our priority – being able to tick the boxes at the end of the day." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

And one practice teacher commented:

"I do remember having a sense of disappointment that the job [of practice teaching] *was not going to be as creative as I'd imagined and looked forward to."* (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

Questions Cluster d. (University-based teaching and assessment):

Modules in which either/both approaches particularly evident, forms taken by university-based assessment, marking schedules, programme guidance re assignments, perceptions of students as to own preferences?

■ Both student and programme personnel respondents said that the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches have been used jointly throughout the university-based taught modules. No specific examples of such joint use (e.g. through reference to particular modules/areas of teaching and learning) were offered, however. One student respondent said that a module focusing on Social Work with Children and Families had embodied a more clear emphasis upon reflective learning. The agency-based programme personnel respondent said they did not feel they had sufficient knowledge to comment.

■ Both student and university-based programme personnel respondents said that university-based assessment tasks are mainly in the form of essays but that Law is assessed by means of an examination. Presentations by students, the use of case studies and the use of timed assignments (i.e. 'seen' exams) were also cited by both respondent groups as commonly used forms of university-based assessment. The agency-based programme personnel respondent said they do not know about university-based assessment and so could not comment.

■ Two out of the three student respondents and both university-based programme personnel respondents said that the marking schedules for university-based assessment tasks require the demonstration by students of both knowledge and of reflective understanding and thus combine the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. The third student respondent observed that incorporation of reflection within university-based assignments is always required by this programme. Again, the agency-based programme personnel respondent expressed a lack of knowledge but put forward the view that all such assessments require the integration of theory and practice.

■ The overall guidance issued by this programme in relation to the completion of assignments generally was described by both student and university-based programme

personnel respondents as involving balanced integration of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches but with perhaps a slightly stronger emphasis upon reflective learning. One student respondent said that this general assignment guidance embodies a constant expectation of a questioning and critical approach. The agency-based programme personnel respondent said that they do not know about this aspect of this programme.

■ In response to a question as to their own individual preferred approach to learning, student responses were variable with one citing reflective learning, one citing a competence-based approach and one citing a mixture and combination of the two.

Questions Cluster e. (Overall programme emphasis):
Emphasis within programme conscious and how this has come about, emphasis made explicit and, if so, how/where?

■ All programme personnel respondents stated clearly that they feel this programme consciously emphasises its combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches. Further, there was a consensus between these respondents' views on how this conscious emphasis has come about, with all respondents stressing the centrality and importance of meetings attended by representatives of both the university and agency partners. Examples referred to were this programme's Management Committee and Practice Assessment Panel meetings. Both the university-based and the agency-based respondents also referred to wider developments in pre and post qualifying social work education generally and the mutual engagement with these by university and agency representatives as contributing to a more clear and shared sense of this programme's particular emphasis. And linked to this, all programme personnel respondents stressed the significance of relationships over time between university and agency-based staff as influential in determining the direction of the programme.

■ Again, all programme personnel respondents stated that combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches is an explicit, as well as a

conscious, feature of this programme. However, two out of the three respondents within this group illustrated this with reference to agency-based practice learning only rather than the programme as a whole. Although the remaining programme personnel respondent referred to this programme's handbook, no specific sections within this were cited as making explicit mention of this programme's emphasis upon combined use of the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches.

Questions Cluster f. (Relationship between approaches and professional identities):
Approaches seen as promoting different types of practitioners, which do employers prefer, does this influence style of practice teaching, where/who decides the programme outcome in terms of type of practitioner promoted?

■ Respondents across the three respondent groups expressed the perception that the competence-based and reflective learning approaches would be likely to produce different kinds of identities and approaches within social work practitioners:

"I think of a highly competence-focused practitioner as being just a kind of functionary really. Someone who is very good at knowing and using procedures but without much else to them." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

"I think there's the difference between just doing – in a very competent kind of way – and then thinking about why you've done something the way you have and what it kind of means. So that would be reflection." (Student respondent 2)

"There is definitely the sense that the competences alone make for a very action-focused practitioner, good on procedures, probably also the law. It's quite sad really to meet former students in agencies and see they've developed in that way because we would hope that we teach students that there is so much more to the job than that. And I can think of practitioners who are really thoughtful and who read around their work and question what they're doing and of course that comes from being more reflective." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

■ Respondents from each group also maintained that wholly or predominantly competence-based social work education and practice is inadequate and even dangerous. For instance:

"It's scary, I think, to think of someone just going through the motions of the agency rules and procedures and not really seeing the service user in their individuality. Would you want that kind of social worker for yourself?" (Student respondent 1)

■ A further perception, shared across the three respondent groups, was that an experience of social work education that is predominantly competence-based results in more compliant/less challenging practitioners whereas a greater emphasis upon reflective learning during social work education would give rise to practitioners who are more critical and assertive. This is suggested in the following description of a competence-based educated social work practitioner:

"....someone who is happy to work within the groove that's been carved out, you know, and not to want to be concerned with – or have any responsibility for – developments and change for the better." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 3)

Whilst a more reflective learning educated practitioner was seen as:

"....the kind of social worker who is always up for change and for looking critically at the assumptions underpinning services, approaches, whatever and challenging those if need be." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

And

"I would see the person who has trained along the lines of reflective learning as being probably more political in their work and more busy with service user's rights and things like that." (Student respondent 3)

■ Moreover, the use of reflective learning during pre-qualifying education was perceived to promote awareness, and a readiness to question on the part of social workers, as to ethical issues and their own value bases:

"The student who is a reflective learner is more likely to develop into a practitioner who questions their own values and the baggage they bring to the job as a human being and examine these aspects of themselves." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

■ Practice teacher respondents appeared to associate competence-based education with more basic, or foundational, levels of social work practice as follows:

"I suppose I would say that competence in social work is the kind of basic foundation that then needs building on." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

"Well, it only takes you so far, doesn't it, the competence-based approach, and if students depend on that stuff entirely, their practice when they qualify is likely to not be very skilled or sophisticated." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ From one practice teacher respondent came the suggestion that a competence-based practice approach may facilitate more effective engagement with service users:

"At least with the competence approach, families will know where they are. You know, they'll have someone coming in and explaining very clearly what is what and it won't get too complicated or confusing." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

And further that a more reflective learning approach may be associated with a less procedurally able or efficient practice style resulting in the need for collegiate support with regard this:

"I think if you've got someone who's been heavily into reflective learning and they take that with them into practice and carry it on then they are probably going to be quite

dependent on the rest of the team to be supporting them in learning the systems and procedures they need to know. I've worked with someone before who was like that." (Practice Teacher respondent 3)

■ Almost all respondents made an explicit connection between reflective learning and 'reflection' in practice. For student respondents, this link seemed to be to do with reflective learning improving reflective skills in practice

"It's hard, you know, because reflection gets talked about a lot but it seems really hard to define – and not everyone seems to understand it in the same way. So, if you've done a lot on reflective learning on the course, you're likely to be better at reflection when you qualify I would think." (Student respondent 3)

Whilst for educator respondents, this association seemed to be about the use of reflective learning during pre-qualifying education giving rise to practitioners who are more aware of the significance of reflection in practice and more prepared to prioritize this:

"Requiring reflective learning of students is clearly very important in their becoming reflective practitioners who understand and value the place of reflection in social work." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

■ Programme personnel respondents were asked where or by whom the outcome of this programme is decided upon in terms of the type of practitioners it educates for/prepares. All respondents said that this programme acts on feedback from, and seeks to meet the needs of, local employers.

■ Practice teacher respondents were asked what kind of practitioner they think local employers prefer. Two out of the three said that they think this is a more competence-based educated practitioner and one said that in their view local employers probably seek to employ practitioners who have been exposed to in education, and thus embody, combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches.

■ Responses from practice teachers were varied as to the extent to which their practice teaching approach is influenced by their sense of local employer preferences. Whilst all practice teacher respondents said they see reflective learning as important, only one perceived it as essential within social work education. Further, one practice teacher respondent said that students need time to engage with reflective thinking - and that a practice teacher can ensure this is available, whilst another said that students need to understand the limited time available within the workplace for reflective thinking – and that a practice teacher can ensure this by limiting the availability of such time.

Questions Cluster g. (New social work qualification):
Involvement with preparation for new qualification and the emphasis within this, and respondents' preferred approach within new qualification?

■ Each of the three programme personnel and two out of the three practice teacher respondents said that they have had involvement in the planning by this programme for the introduction of the new social work degree. All of these respondents expressed the view that this planning has involved a stronger emphasis upon reflective learning. For example:

"We have spent a great deal of time on this, a huge amount. And in all our planning and discussions we have kept coming back to this issue of how do we ensure that the programme we are creating produces reflective practitioners? So I would say that we have given it more attention than probably when the DipSW was introduced." (Programme Personnel, university-based, respondent 2)

"I've been around a long time now, you know? And I was part of the DipSW being introduced so it does feel like I've been here before. But I think the difference this time has been that we have no longer been concerned with a whole raft of competences and how to accommodate these. Because after the DipSW experience we know how to do that. Now we have been able to think more about reflective practice and I would say that is what we have done." (Programme Personnel, agency-based, respondent 1)

"I feel that there has been a lot of discussion of reflection." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

■ Each respondent group was asked what, from their perspective, they would ideally wish the new social work degree to look like in terms of its use of the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches. A preference for the combined use of the competence-based and reflective learning approaches, but with more emphasis than currently upon reflective learning, was expressed across the respondent groups. In addition both student and practice teacher respondents stated the need for more agency-based practice-based learning, with student respondents citing this as an effective means of drawing together the two approaches:

"What we learn in the college has its own importance but it's only really when you get into placement that you see it in action and making sense and you have to try for yourself to see what you can do and reflect on that. And then reflect on your reflection – so you're really learning." (Student respondent 1)

■ However, maintenance of use of the competence-based approach was also seen as important by all respondent groups but with a different framework for asserting and assessing competence so that it is less mechanistic and reflective learning is more integrated. For example:

"I wouldn't say that I would like to see a complete end to a competence-based approach because I do believe that is a useful checklist almost for what students need to learn about. But I would like to see more discretion for students and practice teachers. And for me to be able to assess more a student's reflective ability alongside their ability to do the job competently." (Practice Teacher respondent 2)

And

"What I would like to see is an end to these endless different descriptors of various aspects of practice and, instead, something less structured and technical and where there was more scope for students to show how they have learned reflectively in relation to the practice they are discussing ." (Practice Teacher respondent 1)

Summary:

This case study has explored the way in which the relationship between the competence-based and reflective learning educational approaches is perceived by a range of participants involved with a 2-year full time DipSW programme. The findings from 10 individual interviews with key informant, final year student, practice teacher and programme personnel respondents have been presented. A non-participant observation of a group tutorial meeting between 8 final year students and their tutor has also been reported.

The understanding of a competence-based approach put forward by respondents was very much in terms of evidence-based assessment of students' demonstration of their ability in relation to various discrete elements of the overall social work role and task. For practice teacher respondents, this approach was predominantly associated with agency-based practice learning but for student and programme personnel respondents, the competence-based approach was also exemplified by the stated learning outcomes for university-based taught modules. Reflective learning was understood by all respondent groups as strongly associated with reflective practice and as featuring personal self awareness, an inductive approach to the use of knowledge and an anti-oppressive practice approach. Whilst practice teacher respondents illustrated the use of reflective learning with reference to agency-based practice learning, students and programme personnel respondents pointed also to its place within the university-based domain of the programme. The overall view of respondents was that this programme embodies balanced use of both approaches.

Although certain core differences between the two approaches were acknowledged, all respondents saw them as essentially complementary. Examples of such joint use within this programme were: within practice learning portfolios (by all respondents), throughout the period of practice learning (by practice teachers), during university-based discussions relating to agency-based practice learning (by students) and during university-based teaching and tutorials more widely (by programme personnel). No respondent suggested any conflict or contradiction between the competence-based and reflective learning approaches though each respondent group qualified this view with certain concerns. Proposals for enhancing dual use of the approaches included more and longer periods of agency-based practice learning (including more directly observed student practice learning), supervision becoming a more reflective (as opposed to procedural) forum and permission and encouragement for students in critiquing aspects of agency-based practice. However, the majority of programme personnel did not feel that this programme's dual use of both approaches can be improved upon.

Evidence of both student competence (mapped in accordance with competence requirements) and reflective capacity was seen as necessary for students to pass their periods of agency-based practice learning by practice teacher and programme personnel respondents. However, practice teacher and student respondents also indicated their view that evidence of reflective learning is not accorded as much priority – or value – as competence-based evidence. Programme personnel respondents described the university-based preparation for student practice learning as placing equal emphasis on each of the approaches but student respondent views were mixed. Practice teachers felt they did not know enough about this to comment but that the programme's written guidance for agency-based practice learning appeared to draw equally upon both approaches (though no specific illustrations of this were offered). Student perceptions as to practice teacher preferences (in relation to the competence-based and reflective learning approaches) were mixed but practice teacher respondents appeared to share a perception of students favouring or prioritising a competence-based approach, at least initially, and of reflective learning being a rather more advanced approach. Correspondingly, practice teacher

respondents referred to their practice teacher training as having emphasised the need to prioritise the assessment of student progress in relation to prescribed competences.

Although student and programme personnel respondents asserted the use of both the competence-based and reflective learning approaches within and throughout university-based taught modules, no specific illustration of this featured in their responses. A range and variety of university-based assessment tasks were referred to. Programme guidance regarding assignments generally was seen as involving and integrating both competence-based and reflective learning approaches as were assignment-specific marking schedules. The agency-based programme personnel respondent stated an inability to comment on the basis of insufficient knowledge but expressed the belief that all university-based assignments would require integration of theory and practice.

All programme personnel respondents maintained that the programme consciously emphasises its balanced use of both approaches and, further, that this has come about through a series of long-standing consultative relationships between university and agency personnel which have resulted in shared agreement on this issue. Similarly, there was a consensus among programme personnel respondents that the programme's dual use of the two approaches is made explicit - but the only examples offered as to where this can be seen (i.e. within programme documents) were of agency-based practice learning guidance.

Alternative forms of professional identity in social work practitioners – arising from exposure to either the competence-based or the reflective learning approach solely or predominantly during pre-qualifying education – were expressed by respondents generally. A competence-based approach was associated with a focus on action and an emphasis on procedures and clarity as to these but also a risk of failure to recognise service users' individuality. A professional identity rooted in a mainly competence-based educational experience was seen as entailing compliance and also as more appropriate to a beginning (i.e. newly qualified) level of practice expertise. Whereas a reflective learning approach was perceived as leading to a more critical, questioning, reflective and

possibly politicised practitioner who would be more ready to examine their value base but who might, however, be less procedurally informed and efficient. Thus neither approach – nor the professional identity characteristics arising – in an extreme form was viewed as desirable and a more balanced outcome was seen as the programme goal. This was reported by all programme personnel respondents to have been negotiated with local social work employers. However, the majority view of practice teacher respondents was that reflective learning is an important but not necessarily essential element of social work education and that employer preferences are for competence-based educated and influenced practitioners.

The group tutorial that was observed was proposed by the tutor as an opportunity for students to provide evaluative feedback on their experience of the tutorial support they had had during their periods of agency-based practice learning. However, students also began to discuss their experience of the programme more generally and, in particular, noted what in their view had been an absence of reflective learning opportunities. As employment-based (i.e. seconded) students, they had each undertaken their 50-day periods of practice learning within their employment settings. Within observed the tutorial, students reflected on difficulties they had experienced with this. They also commented that, other than in the course of this tutorial group, the programme had appeared to provide very limited scope for reflective learning on either an individual or a collective basis. In this way, students appeared to be demonstrating their desire to engage with reflective learning thinking indicators and their appreciation of these as significant in their learning process.

Finally, all interviewed respondent groups articulated the hope that the new social work degree would be informed by both the competence-based and the reflective learning approaches – but with a less tightly prescribed and more flexible framework of competences thereby enabling more space for the use of reflective learning than perhaps currently.